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In copertina: «Typus sympathicus Microcosmi cum Migacosmo», da Athanasius Kircher, *Musurgia universalis* (1650), vol. II, p. 402. Roma: L. Grignani.

Indice

Embedding Moralities. Ethical Practices of Everyday Life

Embedding Moralities.
Ethical Practices of Everyday Life

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Introduction[1]

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A Turn Towards Ethics

Since its emergence as an academic discipline, anthropology has always been concerned with «morality» in the broadest sense. Some of the key figures of modern anthropology, such as Emile Durkheim, Franz Boas, or Bronislaw Malinowski, explicitly explored morality as a set of norms, values, ideals, and perspectives determining social action, shaping possible and acceptable relationships and practices, and defining the horizons in which everyday life is conceivable. Morality as an extension of society – or culture, depending on the language used (Fassin 2014). However, since the end of the 20th century, several voices have spoken critically regarding the approach our discipline has adopted in its interest in morality. James Laidlaw, one of the leading figures of the so-called «ethical turn» in anthropology (Laidlaw 2002) criticises on the one hand an «organicistic» view of morality, rooted in Durkheim's notion of «moral fact», which treats morality as mainly a form of socially defined «duty»; and on the other hand a relativistic perspective that is only interested in the moral dimension as part of the enculturation processes of a specific context – always internally coherent and isolable from the outside world (Laidlaw 2013). Further, a properly anthropological exploration of morality and ethics can only be consolidated, Laidlaw argues, if we recognise that these two domains have their own specificity, and that they cannot be dissolved entirely in the

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[1] While this introduction is the product of the collective work of both editors of the issue, Lorenzo Urbano mainly authored the first three paragraphs and Luigigiovanni Quarta mainly authored the final two paragraphs.

social or cultural. Morality and ethics must also be considered as situated and singular responses to the fundamental question «how should I live?».

Thus, the first «turn» of the ethical turn takes us away from the exclusive focus on the collective, social, cultural dimensions of morality and ethics, and recognises a space of autonomy, of *freedom* (Laidlaw 2002) of subjects in their determinations and judgements. A second turning point, connected to the first, leads towards the centrality of experience in the ethical life of subjects. We are no longer just talking about systems of rules and prescriptions, but also about ways of intertwining relationships, of dwelling in everyday life, of being-in-the-world (Zigon 2008). As Veena Das (2015) argues, how morality and ethics manifest themselves within the flow of the ordinary is not just through judgements of right or wrong, good or bad; it is primarily through forms of co-habitation of the ordinary and through the relationships we build in this dwelling. If words we use to narrate our ethical lives and moral rules are meaningful, Das argues, they acquire meaning in the granularity of everyday relationships. What is common to the plurality of perspectives that compose the «ethical turn» is the search for the concrete and situated ways in which moral concepts acquire meaning and are enacted, not as vertically imposed rules but in the immediacy of the ordinary. Our aim in this issue is to contribute to this debate by offering some ethnographic insights into how morality and ethics «come to life» in specific contexts, and how the concepts that allow us to talk about them are re-appropriated and shaped by the social actors who use them in their daily lives.

Embedded/embedding

Up to now, we have used «ethics» and «morality» with as concepts equivalent meaning – something that many of the authors of the ethical turn do themselves. However, for our purposes, it may make sense to introduce a distinction between these two terms, in conversation with some of the theoretical perspectives that have informed the contributions to this special issue. Where a distinction is introduced, «morality» remains the term for socially shared norms, rules, prescriptions. However, we are not only talking about explicit norms: Jarrett Zigon, for instance, insists on the *embodied* nature of moral dispositions. For Zigon, the more closely individual sphere of morality deals with what is embedded in our everyday practices, in our habits (Zigon 2007; 2008). Borrowing Heideggerian language, he argues that dispositional morality is our ordinary way of being-in-the-world, implicit and unreflective.

On the other hand, ethics is the moment of reflexivity, of creativity, of the process through which subjects actively seek to answer the question «how should I live?». For Zigon, the ethical moment is explicitly one in which the existential ground of the subject breaks down, dispositions and habits fall apart – and therefore a rethinking and rewriting of these dispositions is necessary (Zigon 2007). Likewise, Laidlaw defines ethics as a «reflexive practice of freedom» (2002): ethnographically investigating the ethical life of subjects means taking seriously their capacity to make choices, their *freedom*, which is historically and contextually shaped. In other words, we could say that if «morality» is how we indicate the dispositions and values embedded in everyday practices and relationships, «ethics» is how we can reflect on the process of embedding such dispositions and values in everyday life. This is a process in which subjects are not entirely determined by outside factors (cultural, social, political, economic), but find interstices of autonomy and creativity (of freedom) in which they are able, at least in part, to self-determine themselves. Laidlaw insists on the necessity of accompanying «ethics» and «freedom» in our reflections: if an anthropology of ethics makes sense, it will only do so if we recognise that subjectivities are not entirely overdetermined, but are also produced by the capacity of subjects *themselves* to act and, above all, to shape the horizons within which they act.

The articles in this issue are in dialogue with these perspectives, and build on a debate started with the panel *The Local Lives of Moral Concepts. Ethnographic Expolorations of the Everyday Shaping of Morality and Ethics*, held as part of the 17th EASA Conference in Belfast and coordinated by the editors of this issue. What these different and in some ways divergent explorations of the local lives of moral concepts and ethical practices have in common is precisely the effort not to treat them as immovable, given once and for all. Instead, they should be shown in their processes of embedding in the everyday life of the subjects they talk about, offering a perspective on the often incoherent and fractal ways in which these concepts come to life in the flow of the ordinary (Das 2015).

Ethics in the Ordinary

A prominent perspective within the field of the ethical turn is specifically concerned with this latter dimension: the so-called *ordinary ethics*, whose primary objective is to reflect not so much on ethics as a separate moment of everyday life, but on the ethical dimension of ordinary action (Lambek

2010; Das 2015). Implicitly or explicitly, our actions always include an ethical and evaluative element, which embodies our perception of what is good and what is right. In different ways, the contributions by Imogen Bayfield, Duska Knezevic and Lorenzo Urbano are indebted to this perspective, and offer us glimpses into possible concrete declinations of the ethics of the ordinary.

Bayfield reflects on a specific community development initiative in England, in the context of which residents of marginal areas are invited to participate collectively in decision-making about the use of public funds available to their neighbourhoods. *A* key concept in Bayfield's argument is that of *organisational habitus* (Shoshan 2018) – the dispositions that subjects bring with them from their experiences of collective organisation and action. The concept usually refers to organisational practices; however, Bayfield articulates it by focusing on the «moral orientations» underpinning such practices. The close link that these orientations have with organisational practices emerges effectively in this reframing: they are fundamentally constitutive of these practices, defining not only the motivations for public participation, but also the concrete ways in which it takes place, the objectives it sets, what it considers a priority. At the same time, Bayfield's contribution highlights the fact that moral concepts and categories do not have sharp boundaries; on the contrary, they are often jagged and in constant flux (Das 2015). Divergences in moral orientation do not necessarily lead to ruptures, and indeed different orientations (and different practices) coexist and attempt to harmonise in the spaces in which subjects strive to dwell together.

Knezevic examines the transformations that have taken place in the agricultural sector in Slovenia since the early 1990s, particularly focusing on the conflicting narratives surrounding policies supporting workers in this domain. The author confronts the criticism of Slovenian farmers against policies that were supposed to compensate for a long period of economic contraction in this sector, and which instead had unexpected and negative consequences, above all on working conditions in the fields and farms, causing discomfort and anxiety in those who work there. Rejecting a psychological reading of this distress, Knezevic highlights the emergence, from farmers' discourses, of a specific «work ethic», which values individual effort and considers welfare state support as an «encouragement not to work». The ordinary ethics perspective allows Knezevic to highlight the collective dimension of anxiety related to the worsening of one's economic conditions; but it also reveals the ways in which ordinary action is strongly imbued with moral judgements, especially related to discourses of guilt and responsibility (Laidlaw 2010).

The notion of responsibility is also the focus of Urbano's contribution, which investigates the ways in which the idea of «responsible research and innovation» is re-appropriated and reformulated within two patient organisations active in Italy. The author highlights how the concept of responsibility in regards to scientific research and technological innovation is articulated in the practices of these organisations. Within these contexts, discourses related to responsibility talk about the struggles that subjects undertake to imagine different forms of care, which are based on the immediate, everyday and embedded experiences of caregivers – and on the knowledge acquired through these experiences. In the texture of the ordinary, the re-appropriation of the idea of «responsible research» represents, Urbano argues, not only a way for the situated knowledge of patients and caregivers to gain legitimacy, but also a more general argument in favour of a different way of managing everyday care for chronic conditions. Moral judgements and forms of knowledge production intertwine and influence each other, in an effort to «attune» (Zigon 2017) to the care needs expressed by patients.

Making up people

A key notion that has been explored in anthropology (e.g. Carrithers, Lukes & Collins 1985) and that has gained relevance in the ethical turn is the notion – or rather the plural notions – of «person». Authors such as James Laidlaw (2013) and Veena Das (2020) have, in different ways, intertwined reflections on the notion of person with the themes and perspectives of the ethical turn. Corinna Guerzoni and Luigigiovanni Quarta both present contributions that explore the limits of the idea of personhood, and how these limits are redefined through ethical practices, in a process of – using the words of Ian Hacking (2002) – «making up» people in relation to categorisations in the sciences (biomedical, in this case), and to the moral horizons they shape.

Guerzoni presents some results from his ethnographic work on the «donation» of embryos. We write «donation» in brackets because part of her paper focuses precisely on how the semantics connected to the terms chosen to indicate this reproductive technology is associated with the manifestation of a complex imaginary, of an entire horizon of meaning. Choosing to refer to this social fact in terms of donation or adoption implies a significant difference in the way of conceiving notions that are fundamental to the construction of a community: in particular, the notions of life and person. What is at stake around the ontological definition of the embryo is articulated in a multiplicity of discourses, produces forms of *civic epistemology* (Jasanoff 2007), establishes boundaries between what is considered life and what is not, what can be considered human life and what is not. Furthermore, it creates systems of practices that properly depend on these definitions and question our sense of legitimacy or illegitimacy (Fassin 2018). It is in this sense that the possibility of a careful evaluation of the ethical relationship that individual subjects forge with their practices arises, also in terms of a profound reflexivity. Their belonging to certain horizons of meaning, which also transpires in the lexical choices of social actors, shows up even more in the motivations of their actions. These are complex discursive and ethical systems being mobilised, which, as Guerzoni illustrates well, reveal articulated forms of adherence to specific moral worlds. These systems allow social actors to formulate their own decisions regarding right and wrong, correct and incorrect, referring not only to epistemic regimes, but also to practical, affective and emotional ones. Epistemology and ontology meet here under the umbrella of morality.

Quarta reflects on similar issues, in particular by bringing epistemic and ontological constructions into dialogue, questioning how the moral dimension is, at the same time, their product and producer. His article is rooted in an ethnography of organ donation, but develops in a twofold direction: on the one hand, it questions the experiences – collected in a hospital context – of social actors who, at one stage of their life path (Bessin 2009), found themselves in the position of having to choose whether to accept or refuse organ donation for a deceased loved one; on the other hand, it analyses the expressive and interlocutive modes of social actors who meet and discuss within closed Facebook groups created around the theme of organ donation. Starting from these ethnographic experiences, Quarta argues for a perspective shift in the notion of person. He recognises how social actors – depending on their placement in the social field, their worldview, we might say their *Weltanschauung* – mobilise different notions of person, distant and distinct, which the author conceptualises under the definition of *Cartesian person* and *diffuse person*. Two notions of person, two different images of the world (Wittgenstein 1969), two different moral constructions. To show these different ways of learning and building meanings of one's social world, the author dwells on how, through caring relationships and thus the practical way of translating embedded models, different ways of being-in-the world are shown (De Martino 2023).

Morality and reflexivity

Finally, another relevant reframing that authors in the ethical turn propose is the one around a longstanding issue of anthropological research and writing: that of the researcher's positioning in the field. Didier Fassin, discussing the multiple ways in which this «turn» has been called – anthropology of ethics, anthropology of morality, anthropology of moralities – argues for a specific nomenclature: *moral anthropology* (Fassin 2012). In this way, he aims to underscore that the shift in our perspective on morality and ethics shouldn't simply involve the other, the subjects of our research, but also our own disposition and practices. The ethical turn proposes a reframing of the problems of ethics and morality of the anthropologist as well – pushing us to reflect on ourselves as moral actors in the field. This is an issue that both Agnieszka Pasieka and Giacomo Nerici discuss in their contributions.

Pasieka's article is based on extensive fieldwork within groups belonging to so-called far-right movements. On the one hand, Pasieka draws on a recent vein of research (see, for example, Fassin 2008; Stockowski 2008) that we would like to call «reflexive». Starting from the assumption that anthropological research can lead the anthropologist to meet and reason with and about subjects who are inscribed in morally distant worlds – thus, possibly, generating on a personal level repugnance, discomfort, reprobation, condemnation – the question to be asked is how the researcher can (or should) situate herself in this field. How, that is to say, can she produce knowledge if her moral judgement is – more or less consciously – strongly mobilised. This question is tricky and cannot be resolved in a few introductory lines, necessitating a renewed debate on the public role of the social sciences, the problem of the subjectivity of the researcher, the quest for objectivity, the claim of a purely descriptive anthropology or an *engagée*. Pasieka, for her part, as a reflexive preliminary step, endorses the direction indicated by Fassin (2008), among others, recognising the need for a knowledge able to read the grammars of morality without assuming a moralising stance. A social science, in short, that is constructed immediately outside the perimeter of moral judgement. This stance allows the researcher to develop her reflections under the sign of a consideration of the modalities – moral and ethical – through which the militants of far-right groups are educated, recognise themselves, establish forms of identity and belonging. Morality thus becomes a privileged lens for understanding the values embedded in the practices that go to make up the ultimate sense of a community.

On the other hand, Nerici's article, concluding this issue, addresses a more «classical» perspective, resuming and updating debates that have been fruitfully developed since the 1960s. The research context is that of the Marquesas Islands and in particular of healing practices. The researcher roots his analysis in the extraordinary experiences he had during his research, questioning precisely the meaning of the prefix extra-. The text is entirely constructed in a self-reflexive fashion, shedding light on the ontological dissonances between researcher and research context, dissonances that can provoke, in cascade, interpretative and epistemological dissonances. If what is extraordinary for the researcher is ordinary for the interlocutor, it becomes necessary to return to the former's positioning within his dual fields of belonging: that of research and that of the academic community to which he is obliged to render his work in terms of reflections and interpretations. This dual belonging, however, threatens to produce misleading translations and conceptual over-interpretations. It is precisely for this reason that Nerici considers it necessary to set out again from a lucid analysis of the modalities of construction of the anthropological gaze, modalities that are not only linked to purely cognitive or epistemological postures but that entirely revolve around ethical practices and perspectives embedded in the research. Especially when today's historical sensibility obliges us to be cautious regarding issues such as those, raised by the author, of epistemic extractivism (Grosfoguel 2019) or potentially neo-colonial stance.

What we aim to accomplish with this special issue is to remain faithful to the diversity of approaches that characterise the ethical turn in anthropology, flourishingly inaugurated in the last twenty years. It is a prism of resolutely ethnographic studies, which in various ways fit into this debate, enriching it through specific case studies and ways of reinterpreting the conceptual categories and methodological attitudes produced by anthropologists in recent decades.

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Moralities Colliding in Crisis: the Moral Orientations of Organisational Habitus in a Community Development Programme

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Abstract

This paper is based on multi-sited ethnographic investigation into a community development initiative called Big Local. Residents in marginalised areas of England were invited to form community groups to take control of the funding awarded to their neighbourhood, and to make decisions about how that funding should be spent. This paper shows that group members brought with them different «organisational habitus» (Shoshan 2018): developed dispositions about how to organise that had been acquired through previous involvement in collective organising. Rather than focus solely on the practices of collective organising, however, I propose that these organisational habitus were anchored by two different «moral orientations»: one steeped in a sense of responsibility to include, the other to govern resources effectively. My objective is to show that the practices of organisational habitus cannot be isolated from the moral orientations that anchor them. In doing so, the paper shows that morality is not only fundamental to individuals' motivations for engaging in collective action; why they get involved and what they hope to achieve, but also to the very practice of organising. The analysis illustrates the entanglement of sense and practice, showing how one's motivation to participate shapes how one goes about doing so. This is both theoretically significant, in illustrating that practices of organising are not merely technical but morally imbued, while also having practical implications, by generating understanding of potential sources of tension, cohesion or longevity in groups. This suggests that those leading and facilitating civil society organisations would do well to facilitate conversations about how community groups choose to work, the way they do, and why. Doing so could help unearth members' positions about the change they want to bring about, overcoming tensions in groups, and cultivating an empowered civil society consciously working towards its imagined «ideal society» (Lichterman & Eliasoph 2014).

Keywords: civil society, community development, organisational habitus, embodied morality, everyday ethics.

Riassunto

Questo articolo si basa su una ricerca etnografica multisituata su un'iniziativa di sviluppo comunitario chiamata Big Local. I residenti di aree marginalizzate dell'Inghilterra sono stati invitati a formare gruppi comunitari per assumere il controllo dei finanziamenti assegnati al loro quartiere e per prendere decisioni su come spendere tali finanziamenti. Questo articolo mostra che i membri del gruppo hanno assunto diversi «habitus organizzativi» (Shoshan 2018): disposizioni sviluppate su come organizzarsi, acquisite grazie a un precedente coinvolgimento in forme di organizzazione collettiva. Tuttavia, piuttosto che concentrarmi esclusivamente sulle pratiche di organizzazione collettiva, suggerisco che questi habitus organizzativi siano ancorati a due diversi «orientamenti morali»: uno intriso di senso di responsabilità verso l'inclusione, l'altro verso un efficace governo delle risorse. Il mio obiettivo è mostrare che le pratiche legate all'habitus organizzativo non possono essere isolate dagli orientamenti morali in esse radicati. In questo modo, il testo dimostra che la moralità non solo è fondamentale per le motivazioni degli individui che si impegnano nell'azione collettiva, per il motivo per cui si impegnano e per quello che sperano di ottenere, ma anche per la pratica stessa dell'organizzazione. L'analisi illustra l'intreccio tra senso e pratica, mostrando come la motivazione a partecipare modella il modo in cui lo si fa. Ciò è significativo dal punto di vista teorico, in quanto illustra che le pratiche di organizzazione non sono semplicemente tecniche ma sono intrise di moralità, e allo stesso tempo ha implicazioni pratiche, in quanto genera una comprensione delle potenziali fonti di tensione, coesione o longevità nei gruppi. Ciò suggerisce che coloro che guidano e agevolano la strutturazione di organizzazioni della società civile dovrebbero, allo stesso tempo, veicolare degli scambi su come i gruppi comunitari scelgono di lavorare, sul modo in cui lo fanno e sul perché. Ciò potrebbe aiutare a far emergere le posizioni dei membri in merito al cambiamento che desiderano realizzare, superando le tensioni nei gruppi e coltivando una società civile potenziata che lavora consapevolmente verso la «società ideale» immaginata (Lichterman & Eliasoph 2014).

Parole chiave: società civile, sviluppo comunitario, habitus organizzativo, moralità incorporate, etica del quotidiano.

Introduction: Connectivity amidst isolation: working together in the face of crisis

Newberry Inclusive Community Engagement (NICE), a community group based in a marginalised part of London, was set up as part of a community development programme called Big Local. NICE's meetings usually took place in the shared space of a local community hall, where group members would arrive early to catch up over a cup of tea and a biscuit, before settling around a table to discuss the activities they were considering running for their local community. In May 2020, the group met for their regular monthly meeting. There was nothing routine about this occasion, however: it was the second time they had met online following the announcement, a few weeks previously, that the UK would enter its first national lockdown in an attempt to stem the spread of the Covid-19 outbreak.

The act of meeting online was unfamiliar; the opening portion of the meeting was spent trying to get everyone connected and learning how to use the software. Some of the younger members had, in recent weeks, begun using an online platform for work meetings, but this was the first experience of meeting online for many of the older members. Crucially, several members had been missing from both this and the previous meeting. As a group that had regular conversations about the diversity of its membership and how to work inclusively, it was not a surprise that this absence was a concern.

«Digital exclusion» was an emerging form of marginalisation that was quickly becoming a «hot topic» in these early months of the pandemic. The non-participation of members tapped into several concerns that were exacerbated in this new and strange situation: the widespread fear of isolation and what to do about it; the awareness that some segments of the population were more vulnerable to exclusion than others; and the knowledge that this exclusion could affect their ability to meet their most basic needs, including accessing food and medicine.

As people logged on, the atmosphere was a mixture of giddiness and fear; the former arising from the opportunity to see friendly faces amidst isolation, the latter from the emerging realisation that we were living through a crisis. Evident in the tone of these interactions is an increasingly urgent concern for NICE's neighbours, both those known to the group, as well as for the more abstract Newberry «community». NICE had been granted funding to make the local area an «even better place to live» (Local Trust 2019); the sense of responsibility that came with this funding took on a new urgency in the crisis situation.

The extract below describes a heated debate that unfolded in this meeting. The contentious issue is how to include absent colleagues. Group members' different interpretations of the situation, and their approaches to dealing with it, are evident in the different ways they talk about the problem; the actions they propose; and the kinds of knowledge they draw on as they work towards a solution. I argue that two «moral orientations» underpin the forms of communication and practice that guide group members' participation in this conversation, as well as the life and work of NICE more broadly: an orientation to include on the one hand, and to govern resources effectively on the other. I argue below that these moral orientations act as anchors to the «organisational habitus» that members bring with them to the group. Ruth and Liz feel an urgent responsibility to get absent members connected, and Ruth shows frustration when she feels that her plan to involve them is being blocked by unnecessary procedures; Mark and Matt want to ensure that the correct processes are in place before embarking on action.

NICE steering group meeting, May 2020. Location: online.

> The group begin discussing their «Covid response»: the activities they are considering running to support their community during the pandemic. Liz, an older White woman who has worked in a range of community work roles, and is now employed by the NICE steering group as a member of staff, has been tasked with developing proposals quickly. Mark, a White, middle-aged man who is a manager in the public sector, and chair of the steering group, asks Liz to talk the group through the proposals.
>
> Mark introduces the topic and hands over to Liz, pre-empting the passionate debate that follows: he says that he wants to ensure that there is plenty of time for discussion, «because I know there are a lot of strong opinions in this space».
>
> The first idea they discuss is a «digital inclusion» initiative. This would begin with the most pressing issue of providing digital support to NICE members who had not been able to join online meetings, with the potential of rolling this support out to the wider community once they had a system in place.
>
> Liz: «We've now sourced a tablet, which Gladys has, but we need to find out whether it's working».
>
> Gladys is a retired, Black, steering group member who is not confident with technology. There is a box on the screen with her name in it, but we can't see or hear her. A little while later, a second box appears that also has her name in it, and she does speak at one point, but it is unclear how much she can hear. Both boxes disappear around 9pm; the official closing time of the meeting, though the conversation is still in full flow.
>
> Liz talks the group through the challenges that another group member, Leah, is facing in joining the meeting using her phone, saying that she «needs to investigate», implying that there is more going on.
>
> As well as Mark and Liz, there are three steering group members who are active in this section of the meeting. Hugh and Holly are White «young professionals»; a term used by the group to describe some of its newer members,

all of whom have moved to Newberry in the last few years. Located in one of the more marginalised London Boroughs, Newberry is gentrifying, though property is less expensive than in the surrounding areas, making it an attractive neighbourhood for «young professionals» looking to get on the housing ladder. Ruth is a very active volunteer in the local area but has not yet officially been voted onto the NICE steering group. She is a passionate advocate of the digital inclusion agenda, and drives it forwards in this meeting and at other times. There are also two attendees who are paid by Local Trust, NICE's funder, to provide them with support: Ray is a White, female, community development professional who gives the group general guidance and advice on a range of issues, and Matt is a Black, male, community activist who runs another local not-for-profit organisation called Strengthening Communities in Newberry (SCN), which manages NICE's finances and acts as the legal employer of its staff.

Liz shares more details about the challenges that group members face as they try to get connected.

Matt: «Can I just say that I'm not comfortable listening to conversations about people's personal finances».

The group discuss whether they are happy to allocate some budget to buy data and/or equipment for steering group members.

Ray reminds the group of their broader vision of inclusion: «Essentially what this is about is enabling people to take part in decision-making». This mission of inclusive decision-making is embedded within Big Local's rhetoric of empowerment.

Ruth aligns herself with Ray and tries to build momentum: «I agree. I've got a couple of tablets and phones and things coming in, so if this is something you want to do, then we can use this as a pilot».

Mark puts the breaks on this momentum: «Can I ask where you've sourced these, Ruth?»

Ruth: «They're all donations. These are things people have donated».

Mark: «To you or to an organisation?»

Ruth, sounding as though her patience is being tested, replies: «To me. As I said, I'm a facilitator, so I put out a call for everything from baby clothes to electronics. People have contacted me». For Ruth, this is an urgent issue brought about by the pandemic, and the solution is obvious; the procedure-based line of questioning is simply holding things up.

Hugh: «I'm comfortable in principle that we provide something up to £10-15 a month – that seems uncontroversial. If Ruth has got things, then I think we should go for it. But I do think it should partly be means tested because if people don't need it, then they shouldn't ask for it, and we're not going to start paying people's internet bills, for example».

Liz: «No-one's asked for it; it's what I've found out through conversations».

Mark: «How about the suggestion about buying hardware, Hugh?»

Hugh: «It sounds like Ruth has already got things ready to go».

Ruth: «Absolutely. I don't quite understand the issue. But we can see from this pilot if it works and [decide if] it's something we [want to] roll out.».

Mark: «Ray can I ask, from a due diligence point of view, if we don't know where they've come from, then that could be an issue, right?»

Matt, interrupting: «That's an issue for us [SCN] actually, because we need to underwrite this». Although Ruth is trying to interject, he keeps going – «can I just finish?» She appologies, looking frustrated. He carries on.

Matt: «They need to be independently PAT tested. If anything goes wrong and they burn the house down while they're charging, we would be liable»

Ruth, beginning to sound exasperated: «I don't know how to PAT test it. I'm sorry, Matt, the minute you started talking in acronyms you lost me. I'm just concerned that people aren't socially isolated which is a huge mental health problem». Ruth clearly wants to get this done informally to speed things up.

Matt: «I'm sorry. It's just a simple electrical test».

Ruth: «The [tablet] I gave to [a group member], I made sure she knew it came from me». A brief but poignant comment: Ruth plants the idea that these things can be done without organisations and the formalities that come with them.

Mark suggests that the group buy new equipment instead of using second-hand donations.

Ray: «I think this is a bit of a wasted conversation, to be honest».

Liz: «I'm not sure what the issue is»

Ray: «Do steering group members understand that they can call in?» [Using phones rather than tablets.]

Liz gives more details about the barriers that group members face.

Ray, pointedly: «Can we please not talk about people's personal issues? I think that would be really helpful»

Liz again mentions a group member by name, and Ray interrupts her, loudly and slowly: «Liz, can we please not use people's names?»

Mark asks for a vote on providing data and hardware for 12 months.

Hugh: «I've just quickly done the maths on that». He calculates 15 pounds a month to get absent members set up and suggests £570 as a budget to vote on – NICE often take a vote as a way of moving on from difficult conversations, as well as a performance of democratic decision-making.

Holly: «That sounds like an amazing amount of money and we can approve it and stop talking about it!» She gives a big smile and a double thumbs up, very much ready to move onto another topic. The steering group votes. It passes. They move on.

As Ruth attempts to persuade colleagues to support her plan to get absent members connected as quickly as possible, she is guided by her *moral orientation* to include. In contrast, Mark and Matt's moral orientation is to use the group's resources responsibly by employing effective governance techniques. As group members negotiate a plan of action, these moral orientations and their attendant interactive norms and organisational practices are brought into tension, sometimes leading to feelings of surprise, discomfort or annoyance, as seen in the glimmer of frustration Ruth exhibits when she resists Matt's use of acronyms; a communicative form that excludes those «not in the know».

My objective is to show that actors' moral orientations act as anchors to their «organisational habitus» (Shoshan 2018). These moral orientations manifest as an embodied sense of how things ought to be done as individuals engage in group life. I show below that actors' moral orientations were entangled with their dispositions to interact in some ways and not others, and their preference towards certain practices of collective organising, such as how they felt evidence should be processed, procedures developed, and decisions made. Organisational habitus are the sets of assumptions about how to organise, and with what aim, that actors have acquired, developed and refined through engagement with the various spaces in which they have organised with others, be that in workplace or civil society; community groups, voluntary organisations, family life or religious settings. Groups also develop collective habitus, in which organising practices play an important role; these co-evolve with the habitus of the individuals who make up the group. While the habitus of groups, and the individuals that make them, are fundamentally co-dependent and co-evolving, I build my argument here through analysis of the organisational habitus of individuals, while using this analysis to draw out the implications this has on group life.

This analysis shows how organising practices are infused with a moral sense of how things ought to be done to bring about social change; *how* one sets about bridging the gap between one's reading of what reality is, with one's sense of how it ought to be. It shows how the behaviours and practices that arise from, and reinforce, the moral orientations that anchor them, offer actors a sense of coherence of individual intent, purpose, and practice, even though the journey of arriving at these orientations may be fraught, and the process of enacting them tense. In doing so, the paper argues for an analysis that views moral orientations as concerned not only with the end goal; the change one wants to see, but also with the process of getting there while working responsibly, and the entanglement between the two.

Stemming from this analysis, the paper offers three theoretical contributions in the form of proposed developments to the organisational habitus concept. First, it argues that organisational habitus are anchored by moral orientations, rather than consisting solely of organising practices, structures and processes. This does not contradict Shoshan's version of the organisational habitus concept, but shifts the focus, offering a new and expanded notion. Second, it shows how the moral orientation of an individual's organisational habitus arises as a *felt sense* of how things ought to be done; morals are «things we feel» (Prinz 2007: 13). This second point brings the organisational habitus concept back to the idea of disposition, central to the notion of «habitus» as developed by Pierre Bourdieu (see Bourdieu 1991): rather than being a conscious choice about what practices to use, an organisational habitus is an intuitive sense of how to relate to one's colleagues or co-volunteers in the shared endeavour of bringing ideas to action; a sense that emerges and evolves throughout one's life-course of collective organising. Third, it shows how the organisational habitus that individuals bring with them to the group may be different to those of their colleagues and co-volunteers. This can be a cause of emotional angst for individual members, as moral orientations collide with those of colleagues.

The theoretical insights generated through this analysis have practical implications: practices of collective organising are not just technical but also moral, implying that groups need to be supported to analyse the range of ways in which that morality is experienced by group members. Designers and facilitators of community development programmes would do well to facilitate discussions around members' interpretations of their responsibility, empowering groups to more consciously engage with the moral worlds they create and empowering them to more consciously shape them. This may also support group members to better understand one another, and to overcome any tensions that rumble beneath the surface.

In bringing the investigation of morality into conversation with the concept of organisational habitus, the paper also contributes to the literatures on embodied morality (*inter alia* Zigon 2011; 2010; 2009; Jeong 2020) and ordinary ethics (*inter alia* Lambek 2010a; 2010b; Das 2012; 2015; Sidnell 2010). By investigating morality in the context of collective organising, the paper shows that moral orientations can be as concerned with the process of working together as with the goals one hopes to achieve;

seemingly technical practices also have moral roots. The next section provides a brief note on methods. The following section theorises this interaction between organisational habitus and morality. The following sections outline the organisational habitus that group members brought with them to their work at NICE, illustrating the centrality of moral orientations to them. By doing so, the paper shows how the structures and practices of collective organising are infused with the moral orientations that anchor them, generating insights into group dynamics, cohesion and purpose, as well as the necessary ingredients for cultivating an active civil society.

Methods

The analysis presented in this paper is based on ethnographic research with three community groups, which took place between October 2019 and October 2020. All three groups were part of the Big Local programme, a community empowerment programme that was launched in England in 2010. Through the Big Local programme, 150 areas were selected throughout England because they scored high on the Multiple Index of Deprivation, an Index which seeks to move beyond financial measures of deprivation (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2019). The 150 «Big Local Areas» were then allocated one million pounds each, to be spent by local residents. Due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, all three of the groups that participated in this research transitioned to holding their meetings online about halfway through fieldwork, meaning that the first half of the fieldwork took place in person, and the second half online. This led to significant changes in group life, which peppers the analysis of this paper as well as being explored elsewhere. The broader research project on which this paper is based explored how the residents who became involved with Big Local worked together, and what can be learnt about the politics of «community empowerment» from such a close-up investigation of the dynamics and working practices of groups. This paper presents one aspect of that broader project.

As I commenced fieldwork, I planned to conduct ethnographic research that would consist of participant observation and collaborative projects with groups, and in-depth interviews with members. The collaborative projects, through which I planned to contribute to the work of each group while following their lead on what might be useful, were a way of embedding an ethics of reciprocity in the research design (Powell & Takayoshi 2003; Rumsby 2018; Hilton 2018; Lassiter 2005) as well as enabling me to gain a deeper understanding of the activities and discussions that took place between meetings, and the different roles that people played.

To select which of the Big Local community groups I would conduct fieldwork with, I initially approached Local Trust, the organisation who administered the funding for Big Local and implemented the programme at the national level. Given that I planned to collaborate with the groups, potentially supporting their own research projects should that be a suitable avenue of collaboration, Local Trust agreed to provide me with information about which groups were interested in conducting research in their communities, and of those, which had already worked with a research specialist. The intention was to identify groups whose work I might be able to contribute to, and to avoid confusing their research process by overlapping with other researchers already providing research support.

I then approached a small number of groups with an explanation about my research project, and asked them (1) if they would consider participating in my research, and (2) whether I could collaborate with them on their work, potentially by supporting their own research projects, or anything that they needed extra capacity on. Three groups agreed to participate, and this began a long process of building our ethnographic relationship (a process I have written about in Bayfield 2022). Over the course of the year, I attended all of the groups' meetings, conducted in-depth interviews with 22 individuals who were heavily involved in the work of the groups, and engaged in collaborative projects on various aspects of the groups' work, such as running focus groups in the community and reporting on the findings, helping to design or analyse surveys, and supporting the development of one group's plan for the coming years.

Organisational habitus and morality

My starting point for building a version of organisational habitus that attends to the moral dimension of collective organising is the idea that human engagement with their moral subjectivities (Zigon 2013) is, for the most part, a felt sense of how things ought to be that arises through social practice, rather than a conscious engagement with abstract categories of right and wrong (*inter alia,* Fassin 2012; Das 2012; Lambek 2010a; 2010b; Hall 2011; Nyberg 2007). Ethics can become conscious and explicit, however, when they are breached, contested, or at tension with those of the people around us (Lambek 2010a). Zigon's «moral assemblages» framework (2010) is useful for thinking with the co-existance of a multiplicity of moral possibilities. In his words: «Moral assemblages are unique conglomerations of diverse and often contradictory discourses as well as diverse and sometimes incompatible embodied moral dispositions» (Zigon 2013: 202). This approach, comfortable with contradiction, moves analysis beyond a «totalizing» account, instead offering a way of engaging with the multiple moralities that are brought into a situation by those involved, informed by their engagement with the world beyond it.

In the context of this fieldwork, explicit engagement with actors' moral subjectivities was provoked by the proactive and ongoing attempts to effect change that are an inherent part of community development: if morality is about engaging with the discrepancy between how things are and how they ought to be; about imagining that «our lives could have been otherwise» (Das 2015: 114) then community development is about working together to move towards alternative futures within and through specific local contexts. As I show in this paper, the moral orientations that emerged amongst my participants at NICE were not only concerned with what those possibilities were, but with the process of working responsibly to make them into reality, though interpretations of what that meant differed. Action is a core analytic focus of such an inquiry. In this paper, I focus on the collective organising of action: how should we organise to bring about the change we want to see, given an agreed upon discrepancy between how things are and how they ought to be? Many of the observations and analytic arguments below are relevant to civil society organisations more broadly, though I stay with the «community development» framing as it best resonates with this focus on attempts to bring about collective action.

This coming together of sense and action are central to the notion of habitus, as developed by Pierre Bourdieu, for whom habitus are «systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*» (Bourdieu 1977: 72); «manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking» (Bourdieu 2002: 43) internalised through engagement with our social surroundings (1977), that manifest as an embodied sense of how things are, and how to interact, given this sense. The often-used metaphor of *the game* to describe habitus is useful here: through ongoing exposure to a game one develops an intricate reading of what is happening that provokes a response; an action, or series of actions, the purpose of which is to have an effect on the game. Significant to the discussion of this paper, in the moment of responding, the «purpose» or «intention» of the action may not be conscious to the actor, so immersed in the game that interpretation and response seem to arise organically (Bourdieu 1977). Though the lightness evoked by this metaphor of play may seem far removed from the more serious topic of morality, it captures the way collective organising involves the responsive and seemingly instantaneous (inter)action of those involved, even as they draw on different priorities or motivations.

Bourdieu has been criticised for a lack of engagement with ethics (Ignatow 2009) and morality (Lamont 1992). Gabriel Ignatow suggests that habitus becomes a useful concept to the study of morality if cultural settings are seen as shaping moral judgements (Ignatow 2009: 100) through the entanglement of emotions, culture, morality and embodied knowledge. This argument can be illustrated through an example, quoted in Ignatow (2009) from Haidt and Hersh (2001), who found that the moral judgements of American college students were better predicted by the emotional reactions they gave to hypothetical sexual scenarios than by their perceptions of harmfulness. This example is helpful in illustrating the point that moral judgements are as fundamentally cultural as they are emotionally embodied. My focus on the moral orientations of collective organising shifts the focus somewhat: this is not about abstract moral positions, nor long-held beliefs, but shows how, despite the seemingly practical, technical or procedural practices of organising, organisational habitus are nonetheless imbued with moral orientations. Investigation into the moral dimension of collective organising is not new, evident in the engagement with morality in the literature on social movements (*inter alia,* Jasper 1997; Brass 1991; Anderson 2014; Wang & Liu 2021). What I aim to do differently in this paper is to show that the moral orientations of collective organising are not only concerned with the end result, but with the process of getting there responsibly.

The concept of organisational habitus is a useful theoretical tool for such an endeavour, though one that I adapt. A notion that has been used by a number of scholars, sometimes under the rubric of «institutional habitus» (*inter alia* Reay 1998; Thomas 2002; Atkinson 2011; and see Byrd 2019, for a review), I take Shoshan's (2013) version of the concept as my starting point. Shoshan's version of organisational habitus emerged in the context of her work on the 2011 organising of protests in Israel. The major conceptual contribution she makes is to show that an individual's organisational habitus «spills over» from one context to others: as activists engaged in organising protests, they brought with them organising structures and practices acquired through their engagement with the military. Shoshan proposes that this «militarism» underpins collective organising throughout different spheres of Israeli society. Her focus is on the «practical knowledge» and «organising patterns» of organisational habitus. My aim below is to show how these practical aspects of collective organising are inseparable from actors' morally infused sense of how they should work together to bring about social change. Rather than contradicting Shoshan's explication of the organisational habitus concept, I propose a shift in focus, and an extension of scope: her passing reference to the «normative beliefs» and «metaphors» that legitimise militarism as a way of organising indicate that she views the organising practices she describes as value-laden and ethically imbued. The next section outlines the moral orientations that underpinned collective organising at NICE, and shows how the organising structures and practices that participants saw as appropriate emerged through those moral orientations.

The moral orientations of organisational habitus in community development: A *felt sense* of how things ought to be done

NICE members' organisational habitus[1] consist of a set of interactive norms and organisational practices infused with their sense of responsibility to include, or to govern the group's resources effectively. The forms of social practice that participants came to expect in all elements of the group's life and work were informed by these moral orientations, from the types of knowledge they valued, and the way they felt the group should engage with that knowledge, to the way they interacted in the casual spaces before the «business» of the meetings began, and the more intentional deliberations that followed.

Ruth and Liz's primary motivation in the ethnographic excerpt above was to ensure the inclusion of those steering group members facing access issues. This moral orientation informs their engagement in all aspects of the social and practical life of the group: they prioritise making people feel welcome and comfortable over working efficiently; they use an informal communication style so as not to alienate anyone; they view bureaucracy

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[1] Following Atkinson (2011); Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008); Papacharissi *et al.* (2013), among others, I use «habitus» for both the singular and the plural.

as exclusionary and often unnecessary; and they value knowledge acquired through direct relationships with individuals, particularly those who face marginalisation. For example, prior to moving online, they would chat informally with everyone who turned up to meetings, making sure they felt welcome and included. Several group members had become less involved with NICE's work due to personal circumstances, so Liz kept in contact with them between meetings to make sure they felt «in the loop» when they could next attend. Ruth made use of her extensive informal networks; valuing the knowledge she could acquire by talking to local people. For example, when the steering group began discussing the possibility of supplying hot meals for staff working at their local hospital during the pandemic, Ruth steered them away from this idea, as she knew that local organisations had already got systems in place and the hospital was inundated with donations of food. Neither Ruth nor Liz engaged in extensive discussions about the group's processes or procedures; the bureaucratic dimensions of group life. While Liz had to draw up written project proposals as part of her job, this was a process she found frustrating, particularly as the proposals she had been asked to put together frequently got rejected by the steering group. Similarly, although Mark, as chair, had set a requirement that all proposals for activities or projects be submitted to the steering group in writing, Ruth never followed this requirement, often raising new ideas in the «Any Other Business» section of meetings, or simply jumping in when she felt the moment was right. This set of dispositions, interactive norms and practices is inextricable from Ruth and Liz's interpretation of the reason for the group's existence: to enable inclusive decision-making about collective resources.

On the other hand, Mark and Matt's primary motivation was to ensure that NICE and SCN were implementing good governance techniques that ensured the responsible and transparent use of resources. To do this, they wanted the group to evaluate evidence systematically, and to develop repeatable processes and procedures that would ensure accountability and transparency. Mark and Matt both tended to engage in the deliberative portions of meetings with formal, logic-driven interactive styles, with the aim of making rational, evidence-based decisions. In the passage above, both are keen to establish where the equipment in question had come from; an important part of ensuring that the group was working transparently. As Ruth pushes forward her idea, Mark and Matt both re-frame the terms of the debate by moving the conversation away from the needs of individual steering group members and towards the status and origins of the devices. Ray and Matt also repeatedly request that the group not discuss specific individuals, wanting to «depersonalise» the meeting, a social norm seen as «appropriate» within formal meeting spaces (Van Vree 2002; 2011). Hugh was also someone who shared many of these concerns with Mark and Matt, though his preference for efficient decision-making as a way of rapidly mobilising resources for community benefit often lead him to steer clear of using meeting time to discuss procedural details, particularly when he perceived the topic of discussion to be relatively minor, or the sum of money small. This shows not only that actors can bring different assumptions about what an interactive space is for, and therefore how to engage in it, into the same organisation (cf. Lichterman & Eliasoph 2014), but that these different assumptions and their attendant practices can even be brought into the same encounter.

I suggest that the different aspects of attitude and behaviour I describe are not coincidence: organising practices and interactive norms arise from and through participants' moral orientations as felt, embodied dispositions. Emotions play an important part in motivating action, for both individuals and groups, though these emotions, infused with moral beliefs and arising through social surroundings, are «open to cognitive persuasion» (Jasper 1997: 110). Over the course of fieldwork, and as I repeatedly observed the different organisational habitus described being brought into tension in the interactive space of meetings, I was made aware in the private conversations I had with participants of how deeply felt their sense of responsibility was, though this manifested in different ways. What my participants were communicating was not merely their rational and conscious position, but a *felt* sense of how to interact, and with what aim, that fundamentally shaped how they participated in NICE, and that motivated their participation.

The interview excerpts below show that the emotions of participants were not only concerned with the goals of the group; this was not a case of moral outrage motivating action, of the kind articulated by Jasper (Jasper 1997: 128). Rather, the emotions Liz and Hugh describe were fundamentally concerned with *how* the group was working; concerns that seem to have arisen in part through the very different contexts in which they had previously engaged with collective organising, an observation that resonates with Shoshan's (2018) argument that organisational habitus «spill over» from one context to another. While Liz had been involved in community work her whole life, and through this involvement had been surrounded by the rhetoric and practice of inclusion, Hugh's professional life had led him to have influence over large sums of public money; a responsibility he had come to take very seriously. This points towards organisational habitus, and the moral orientations that anchor them, being gendered in both the journeys that individuals take, the spaces in which they find themselves, and have access to, and the roles they are expected to play in those spaces. It was not a coincidence that the members who came to play a pastoral role, making people feel welcome and needed, and ensuring they stayed connected, were all women, across all three groups. Nor was it a coincidence that in the groups that had treasurers, the people who took on this role were both men. Of course, the sample size is small, and observations about gender are always only trends. These trends do, nonetheless, indicate that certain skills are associated with people of particular genders, who then tend to be granted more opportunities to develop them.

The crisis situation of the covid-19 pandemic was a period in which individuals' commitments to their moral orientations intensified. Below, Liz tells me about the anxiety she felt in those early online meetings, and reflects on why this was:

> [I was] frustrated because I knew that people would talk less on zoom, because Gladys: the first two meetings you couldn't even see or hear her for some of the time. And then Leah wasn't there at all; George wasn't there at all. I'd been trying to help them get on there. […] Gladys got on the first meeting, but she couldn't see or couldn't hear. I suppose I take that very very very seriously, just in my life and professionally: that people have to be part of the discussion. So part of it was professional unease, and concern. My basic thing is I have to always include. It probably comes from childhood[2]: I have to include people. So there was a whole level of stuff, which there always is, isn't there? I felt anxious about what I was having to do: I was wanting to get the minutes right; the zoom thing was weird; I wasn't thinking the participation was right; I was having to focus on the agenda; and I was so worried about Gladys: «hello Gladys, can you hear Gladys?». Talking to Gladys on the phone; Leah was there: [but] can you see her picture properly? So yeah, I can't separate that all out (Liz, NICE member of staff).

Although she had several responsibilities in her role, Liz carried this need to include with her throughout the various aspects of her work. For

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[2] She is making reference here to the voluntary work she did alongside family members as a child.

example, she spoke of using the «power and control» that she had as a minute-taker to amplify the voices of those who she felt were being dominated, by asking for clarification on points they had made but had since been forgotten, as a way of ensuring that these points were considered by the group.

Hugh had a very different motivation, and was more concerned with what decisions were made than who made them. In the period leading up to the interview below, Hugh had invested a lot of time and energy into developing a new grants competition through which local residents could apply for funding for projects or initiatives. He had also pushed forward the idea that the group should donate a large sum of money to the local foodbank; an idea he was struggling to get off the ground. At the time of the conversation below, Hugh had made the decision to step back from the group.

> I was encouraged that I was able to get the [grant system] to work because I wanted to prove to myself that you could do something: if you really put a load of time and effort you could get something done, and morally it felt like the right thing to do, to try to do something with all that money around the time of the pandemic. I felt like the organisation was doing morally the wrong thing by just sitting there and being happy not doing anything, whilst people were struggling. I really struggled with why people were comfortable with that, and so I wanted to do something myself to at least feel like I was contributing positively to society. That weighed on me. And I think the money while I've been involved […] has really weighed on me: I think, well, if someone asked me what we'd spent the money on, would I be comfortable saying «this, this and this, and it totals this amount»? […] «would I be able to justify it? Would I be comfortable, if it was my own money?» […] And I felt that the dithering and the apathy of the group just really surprised me, and I don't know why they don't feel the same weight of the money; the scale of the opportunity for the area, and how their actions mean that the opportunity is just gonna kind of get lost, you know […] (Hugh, NICE steering group member).

Hugh's main frustration with NICE's working practices was that decisions were not made efficiently; the group's collective deliberations included too many tangents and work became delayed, resulting in the group's resources not being allocated with the urgency he felt was needed, particularly in the context of the pandemic. Hugh's preference for efficient deliberation meant that his contribution towards developing thorough procedures and processes took place predominantly outside of meetings, while attempting to steer the group's deliberations towards finalising decisions.

In the early months of the pandemic, the moral orientations of many group members intensified. This could have been because working in this context produced additional challenges to them living up to those moral orientations. Liz was anxious in online meetings because she could not use many of her usual strategies for including people. She felt an increased sense of urgency because she knew that group members were excluded in this new situation, and was desperately looking for new ways of supporting their involvement. Her motivation in the meeting above was entirely focused on supporting those facing the most significant barriers, in a way that resonates with the «tunnel vision» often used to describe those operating in crisis situations (Schraagen & Ven 2008; Arias-Hernandez & Fisher 2013). At the same time, the group was suddenly having to make decisions in the very different social context of online meeting platforms, in which it can be difficult to read one another's positions, and to cultivate a shared position as a group. In this sense, it is not surprising that some of the groups' early online negotiations were not as efficient as they had been in real life, nor that some of those members, like Hugh, who placed a high value on effective decision-making, became increasingly frustrated at this time.

The presence of multiple organisational habitus and moral orientations within the same group clearly has significant implications for the broader group dynamics. Most fundamentally, actors' moral orientations play an important role in how and why they engage in the work of the group, thereby shaping what they hope the group will achieve, and how they will achieve it. Perhaps most significantly, these competing orientations can be a source of tension, as seen above. This creates a challenge for groups when trying to arrive at a shared decision or, more broadly, in agreeing on a shared sense of purpose. To overcome this challenge, it was often necessary for NICE to conduct extensive negotiations before arriving at collective decisions. Compared with the other groups, they also dedicated more time to social activities, and to exercises seeking to define common goals.

The same cannot be said of the other groups. In Action Committee of Enderton and Danbury (ACED), there was a near complete consensus that the group should aspire to effective and efficient decision-making, with little discussion about how to make decisions inclusively. The group's arrival at this shared position was the result of a challenging history and fraught beginning. Many people had left the group, and those members who remained had a fairly similar outlook on how they wanted to work, meaning that they tended to arrive at collective decisions with relative ease. A very high degree of consensus and similarity of approach can create other challenges for groups, however. For example, ACED sometimes struggled to generate new ideas, or engage in creative problem solving. The third group, Pondmead Action Community Team (PACT), had only a small number of active volunteers, who mainly had very little time. This meant that much of the group's voluntary work was carried out by only two or three people. As a result, what this select group could get done tended to be highly valued by other members, who were keen to support their work rather than debate the process through which they conducted it. NICE was therefore the group in which competing moral orientations were most explicitly brought into tension, due to their different historical journey and group composition.

Across all three groups, those who took on leadership roles all had skills in the effective governance of resources, which they had gained through work or other voluntary activities. While this was predominantly men at NICE, ACED and PACT were both led by women. Nonetheless, across groups, those from more privileged backgrounds tended to have had more opportunities to take on management positions at work, and had developed skills associated in effective governance in the process. Some of these same individuals, mostly those with past experience of working in civil society spaces of various kinds, had also developed techniques and attributes that enabled them to facilitate conversations geared towards inclusive decision-making. It was these individuals with past experience of both governance and inclusion techniques who became the chairs in all three groups.

Discussion

Above, I outlined the moral orientations that underpinned the organisational habitus of members of a community group, NICE, in the context of a community development programme, and illustrated how these moral orientations were entangled with the organisational practices and interactive norms that individuals brought with them to the group. Through this analysis, I made the conceptual argument that the structures and practices of organisational habitus are anchored by moral orientations. Individuals' organisational habitus emerges and evolves throughout their lifetime of collective organising. Through this combined investigation into both morality and collective organising, I have shown that moral orientations are not only geared towards what groups are trying to achieve, but also to the process of working together to bring about change. This has implications for understanding how individuals participate in civil society spaces and why, but also for unpacking some of the tensions that can rumble beneath the surface of group life, in voluntary community groups and beyond.

Given that people's access to participate in collective organising of different kinds is deeply classed, raced and gendered, organisational habitus are also patterned by the wider power structures of society: those who aspired to organise efficiently and effectively were all employed in formal institutions in which they had managerial responsibilities over projects or people; roles more easily accessed by those from more privileged backgrounds in terms of class, gender, race, and other axes of privilege. Those who took on a pastoral role, attending to the emotional wellbeing of co-volunteers both in meetings and between them, were all women, across all three of the groups. Analysis of the different organisational habitus that arise in community empowerment initiatives can therefore act as an heuristic device for understanding who becomes influential in these spaces, generating insights into how better to facilitate the involvement of those facing marginalisation in society more broadly.

The paper's second argument was that the moral orientation of an individual's organisational habitus manifests as a *felt sense* of how things ought to be done; the conscious awareness of such a sense might arise when it is undermined or contradicted. Although one's sense of oneself as a moral subject may not be clearly defined; «moral concepts do not have sharp boundaries» (Das 2015: 114), moral subjectivities can nonetheless come into focus at certain moments, such as when they are at tension with those of the people around us. The conversation about how to run the digital inclusion initiative was one such situation, though others occurred during the fieldwork period, such as a heated disagreement about whether use of the software «excel» to create NICE's budget would exclude people from participating. Curiously, although the two moral orientations outlined above were present in all three of the groups that were part of this research, NICE was the one in which they were most evenly represented, and also the only group in which disputes almost always centred around the inclusivity of working processes. This was largely a reflection of the broader and more diverse membership of the group compared with the other two groups, who both relied on a very small number of people who had time to conduct tasks between meetings, and who therefore tended to choose how they conducted those tasks. The higher degree of consensus about appropriate working practices in the other two groups meant that the two moral orientations did not collide with the same intensity as they did at NICE: the moralities that together make up moral assemblages can have different degrees of influence.

This observation led to a third argument: that multiple organisational habitus, and the moral orientations that anchor them, can co-exist within the same group. The orientations to include, and to govern resources responsibly, are both concerned with organising styles, norms and practices. It was these moral orientations that emerged as most significant during fieldwork, though others existed. I have shown above how actors approached the same meeting through their different organisational habitus. The interaction between these organisational habitus underpinned the interactive norms and organising practices of group life, though they were never discussed explicitly. This interaction of contrasting assumptions was sometimes a source of tension for the group; a tension that intensified as moralities collided amidst the urgency of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although this collision contributed to the departure of one group member, both organisational habitus continued to co-exist in the group afterwards; this member's departure did not lead to a decline in other members' commitment to effective governance and, as with all groups, other changes in membership meant that the precise balance of organisational habitus continued to shift and evolve over time.

The theoretical insights generated through this ethnographic analysis have practical implications. If the way that groups work together is not just a question of the techniques used to organise collectively, but of the moral orientations that anchor these practices, then enabling groups to unpack their moral positions, as individuals and groups, could bring a number of benefits. Doing so would help individuals to gain clarity on their own motivations and those of their co-volunteers, and to analyse how these motivations affect their participation in group life. This could help individuals to understand why they and colleagues work the way they do, and what differences exist, and to work towards consciously developing working practices that are grounded in a shared sense of responsibility and purpose. Incorporating the facilitation of conversations about organising practices and moralities into community development programmes could therefore empower civil society groups to more consciously shape their futures together, and those of the communities they serve.

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Farmer Distress Through Ordinary Ethics: «Abolish the Social Support and Give Us Fairer Prices!»

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Abstract

Agriculture in Slovenia has been dramatically changed since proclaiming independence from socialist Yugoslavia in 1991 and joining the European Union in 2004. Since then, the farmer-entrepreneur has become a role-model of various agricultural developmental orientations. Yet the newly defined «moral economy» expected farmers to follow contrasting imperatives of pursuing constant economic growth, environmental and social sustainability propagated through the normative person, who should be simultaneously a productive, innovative and competitive but also a just, healthy and satisfied farmer-entrepreneur.

This article discusses some results of the ongoing anthropological project «Changes in Agriculture through the Farmers' Eyes and Bodies». The author argues that farmers have been squeezed between contrasting sets of values and imperatives of constantly changing agricultural developmental orientations since 1991 on the one hand, and their moral worlds of farming practices on the other. These developments, however, have not brought only opportunities to advance farms that was not possible under socialism, but equally so farmers' lived experience of uncertainties. The article focuses on ethnographically observed anxieties among the farmers through examining their ordinary moral reflections and sentiments about current circumstances for farming what Lambek (2010) refers to as «ordinary ethics». Farmers revolve around the issues of social welfare and normal prices through communicative acts to assert guilt and responsibility for their lived distress in the context of labour intensification and the changing rural communities. This communicative labour also highlights the ethical breach between farmers and the State, and between «real farmers» and «fake farmers», bringing the ethical dimension to the forefront when considering farmer distress.

Keywords: agricultural change, farmer distress, ordinary ethics, guilt, post-socialist Slovenia.

Riassunto

L'agricoltura in Slovenia è cambiata radicalmente dopo la proclamazione dell'indipendenza dalla Jugoslavia socialista nel 1991 e l'adesione all'Unione Europea nel 2004. Da allora, l'agricoltore-imprenditore è diventato un modello di diversi orientamenti di sviluppo agricolo. Tuttavia, l'«economia morale» emersa da questo processo prevede che gli agricoltori seguano imperativi contrastanti: perseguire allo stesso tempo una crescita economica costante e sostenibilità ambientale e sociale, imperativi propagandati attraverso una «persona normativa», che dovrebbe essere contemporaneamente un agricoltore-imprenditore produttivo, innovativo e competitivo, ma anche giusto, sano e soddisfatto.

Questo articolo discute alcuni risultati del progetto antropologico in corso «NAME». L'autrice sostiene che gli agricoltori sono stati schiacciati tra le serie contrastanti di valori e imperativi degli orientamenti di sviluppo agricolo in costante cambiamento dal 1991, da un lato, e i loro mondi morali delle pratiche agricole, dall'altro. Questi sviluppi, tuttavia, non hanno portato solo opportunità per far progredire le aziende agricole che non erano possibili sotto il socialismo ma anche l'esperienza vissuta degli agricoltori di fronte alle incertezze. L'articolo si concentra sulle ansie, osservate etnograficamente, dagli agricoltori, esaminando le loro riflessioni e i loro sentimenti morali ordinari sull'attuale situazione dell'agricoltura, campo che Lambek (2010) definisce «etica dell'ordinario». Gli agricoltori si concentrano sulle questioni del benessere sociale e dei prezzi normali attraverso atti comunicativi per affermare la colpa e la responsabilità per il loro disagio vissuto nel contesto dell'intensificazione del lavoro e del cambiamento delle comunità rurali. Questo lavoro comunicativo evidenzia anche lo iato etico tra gli agricoltori e lo Stato, e tra i «veri agricoltori» e i «falsi agricoltori», portando la dimensione etica in primo piano quando si considera il disagio degli agricoltori.

Parole chiave: cambiamento agricolo, stress degli agricoltori, etica dell'ordinario, colpa, Slovenia post-socialista.

Introduction

From July 2021 to April 2022, I conducted anthropological fieldwork in Pomurje, the most intensive agricultural region in north-east Slovenia. A fieldwork is a part of the basic research project «Changes in Agriculture through the Farmers' Eyes and Bodies» (2020-2024), which aims to better explain the impact of radically changed post-1991 Slovenian agricultural developments on farmers' health-related suffering than it is conveyed by occupational health evidence.

Contrary to the still prevailing positivist and «psy» approaches in the field of farming stress problematic, which a priori define risk factors, test the correlations among them and marginalize ethical, political and emotional dynamics that shape farmers' experience of distress (Price & Evans 2005; Bryant & Garnham 2014; 2018) or focus on «individuals and what they lacked – resiliency, skills, information» (Ramírez-Ferrero 2005: 3), I have examined wider circumstances recognized as endangering their conditions of being well by farmers themselves. The starting point of the study is that farmers are caught between contrasting values and moral imperatives of constantly changing agricultural regulations and development imperatives since 1991, on the one hand, and their «local moral worlds» (Kleinman 2006) of farming practices on the other which may affect their conditions of distress, including illnesses.

In this essay, however, I focus on the farmers' reasoning about their constant worries, fears, and anxieties through examining their ordinary moral and immoral reflections and sentiments about current circumstances in Slovenian agriculture. I encountered these moral considerations in our «discursive interactions» (Lempert 2013: 371) through both participant observation approach and semi-structured interviews with research participants to locate their evaluative judgements in their accounts which refer to both their good local farming practices and ill experience of uncertainties.

Although the research participants with whom I discussed the issue were farmers, who differ in terms of how they farm, and agricultural advisors, they firstly expanded their narrative on the broader circumstances which they associate with farmer distress to what they term «the social [welfare state]». The «social» theme, interwoven as well as with other emergent themes in our «communicative labor» (*Ibidem*), evoked evaluative judgments and sentiments about ongoing tensions in agriculture as experienced by research participants in their daily lives, including blaming those they hold responsible for these conditions, and what they believe should be done to resolve their distress in terms of what is most important to them in order to farm and live a decent life.

In the following sections, I first outline assumptions that I share with some authors who theorize social suffering, moral economy and ordinary ethics in order to discuss the ethnographically observed farmer distress and research participants' reasoning about their anxieties in the context of radical change in Slovenian agriculture after 1991. I then briefly inform the reader about the post-1991 trends in agriculture in the country that shape farmers' experiences of distress. After a short description of the methodology used, I present the results of the thematic analysis of farmers' moral reasoning about their distress in current agricultural circumstances, discuss them and draw a conclusion.

Theoretical umbrella

I have tackled farmer distress through a non-medical approach, combining assumptions of social suffering with some theorisations of moral economy and ordinary ethics in the field of farming stress problematic. In order to explain farmer distress as farmers' response to the introduced structural changes in agriculture and changed developmental orientations in Slovenian post 1991 agriculture, I draw on the intellectual tradition of critical medical anthropologists and sociologists (Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987; Kleinman *et al.* 1997; Ådhal 2007; Farmer 2009; Fassin 2007; Holmes 2013; Wilkinson 2005; Wilkinson & Kleinman 2016), who in their studies consider social suffering as a response to a drastically changed situation in one's life. I share their basic assumption that social forces are embodied in experience of pain, disease and trauma, and that individual suffering should be discussed also as a manifestation of socio-structural inequalities, in this research, within the agri-food chain. Implicitly, this was demonstrated by several authors who showed in their post-socialist ethnographies how the traces of the past enter the present not as legacies but as new adaptations, and how an object of value was transformed in different ways for different groups of people in post-socialist countryside (e.g. farmers and various other social groups), and evoked their critical reactions and moral sentiments (e.g. Pine 1994; Lampland 1995; Verdery 2003; Buchowski 2004; 2009; Kligman & Verdery 2011; Fox 2011; Krzyworzeka 2013; Naumović 2013). These ethnographies do reflect the experience of uncertainty and insecurity caused by radical social change in the observed social groups of rural South-Eastern, Eastern and Central Europe, but not in relation to their embodied ill-being.

Theorisations of moral economy provides a framework for examining the ways in which the observed farming economy intersects with farmers' notions of a good farmer (Burton 2004; Burton *et al.* 2021) that farmers themselves believe affect their being well. I relied at the beginning of my fieldwork on some elements of Sayer's work (2000; 2007; 2015) which, compared to the seminal works of Thompson (1963; 1991) and Scott (1976) about the moral economy, pose the intersections between moral economy, political economy and well-being, and regard all economies as moral economies in some respects. Investigating the continuing (though changing) relevance of moral economy for positive/analytical and normative/critical work in radical political economy, Sayer (2000; 2005) argued that moral economy embodies norms and sentiments regarding the responsibilities and rights of individuals and institutions toward others, and that these norms and sentiments go beyond questions of justice and equality to include notions of the good. To humanize economics, Sayer advocated the moral economy approach (2000; 2015), which goes «beyond the narrowly utilitarian stance of existing normative economics to consider ethical issues of what people need for their well-being» (Sayer 2000: 82). According to him, economic action seems to be solely a matter of power and self-interest if researchers fail to acknowledge that economic action is at least partially morally guided. Moreover, he held that their critique cannot be separated from questions of ethics or morality and that «ethics should not be seen as separate from social practice and well-being and hence reducible to an external normative theory» (Sayer 2007: 262).

Similarly, Lambek (2010) voiced his critique of anthropological theory that disregards the ethical in social action in favour of structural, power, and interest analyses. Inspired by Wittgenstein's and Austin's arguments regarding ordinary language, he argued that ethics is inherent in speech and action, referring also to Aristotle's argument about ethics as indicative of human telos since «humans strive for excellence and well-being, asking everywhere "How ought I to live"» (Lambek 2010: 2). According to him, the ordinary refers to ethics that are «relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself» (*Ibidem*).

In the course of my fieldwork, I found considerations of ordinary ethics or virtue ethics also appropriate for interpreting my collected material. I also relate «the moral/ethical» to everyday life and practices and farmers' experience of ill-being without, in Sayer's words, «reducing it [morality] to a matter of individual subjectivity or social convention» (Sayer 2007: 261). In this approach, ethics is not separate from farmers' social practice and experienced well-being, and is not reducible to external normatively suggested multifunctional sustainable agriculture as imagined by decision-makers. I focus rather on farmers' conceptions of good and bad circumstances for farming today through examining «the moral texture of economic practices important for [their] well-being» (Sayer 2007: 265). In this line, the observed moral reflection of farming conditions is not treated just as forms of affect but evaluative judgements of how farmers themselves are being treated with regards to what they value, that is, things they consider to affecting their well-being. From this perspective, morality is not seen as exterior to individuals but rather as «an inner state nourished by virtue and nourishing action» (Fassin 2012: 7) in their «local moral worlds» (Kleinman 2006), or, rather as «a modality of social action or of being in the world» than as «a modular component of society or mind» (Lambek 2010: 10).

Farmers' reasoning about their being well is conveyed and observed through the communicative labour that, in Zigon's words, «shake one out of the everydayness of being moral», the moments that Zigon calls «moral breakdown» (2007: 133). It could be said that in such communicative labour farmers find themselves in an ethical dilemma that forces them to «step-away» from unreflective everydayness of the moral and «figure out» or «deal with the situation-at-hand» (Zigon 2007: 133). Indeed, when confronted with irritating and sometimes still taboo questions about their ill-being in the post-1991 agricultural context in Slovenia in order to consider the possibility of introducing psychological support for farmers, farmers reflected on, made sense of, and sought solutions between «what *is* and what *ought* to be» (Lambek 2015: 4; emphases original) – a realm of the ethical or value when farmers imagine something better for them. In doing so, they implicitly question another dilemma – whether they themselves are responsible for their lived anxieties or is the State responsible for conditions (structures) outside their bodies and minds, beyond their personal control.

Post-1991 trends in agriculture in Slovenia

Agriculture and farming in Slovenia has been dramatically changed and restructured since the proclamation of independence from socialist Yugoslavia in 1991. If in socialism agricultural development was designed within the morale of the planned economy after 1991, the model of multifunctional agriculture was followed in harmony with the morale of the market economy. In 2004, when Slovenia joined the European Union and in 2007 the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the farmer-entrepreneur (Fox 2011) became a role-model of multifunctional developmental orientation and gradually, after the 2008 global food crisis, the developmental vision was defined towards sustainable agriculture. Yet the newly defined moral economy (ReSURSKŽ 2011) expected from farmers to follow contrasting imperatives of pursuing both constant economic growth and practicing environmental and social sustainability propagated through the normative person who should be simultaneously a productive, efficient, innovative and competitive but also a collaborative, just, healthy and satisfied farmer-entrepreneur.

However, the radically transformed agricultural context in the last three decades, entails not only the opportunities to advance farms compared to socialist times, but also unfavourable trends: on average, about 1,000 farms have stopped farming per year since 1991 (from 156,549 farm holdings in 1991 to 68,331 in 2020), and the most rapid decline of medium-size farms – «too small to be economically efficient, but too large to be profitable» (Bojnec & Latruffe 2013: 216) – has been registered since 2004.

It is not a surprise that this radical transformation brought about the health statistics in Slovenia which mirror the global ones. Agriculture has become the second most hazardous sector in terms of reported work-related accidents and health difficulties behind only the processing industry. In terms of suicides by occupation, farmers belong to the group «Skilled Agricultural, Forestry and Fishery Workers», which occupies the first position among the other occupational groups with a crude suicide rate (57.9 per 100,000 employed persons) four times as high as the total crude rate of all occupational groups (13.8 per 100,000 employed persons) in 2016 (Roy & Knežević Hočevar 2019).

The increasing suicide rates among farmers in Slovenia is not a focus of the project but rather a motive for studying farmer distress. Therefore, the initial research questions were: whether and how agricultural restructuring since 1991 has come to be translated into personal suffering, and how farmers respond to (interpret, make sense of, and engage with) these distress-related conjunctures in agriculture.

Methodology

I conducted anthropological fieldwork in rural Pomurje (north-eastern Slovenia) between July 2021 and April 2022. This period coincided with COVID-19, but fortunately I managed to volunteer on three family farms (three weeks on each) and occasionally (a few days) on the others. The field visits included about 40 research participants from 24 family farms; I had already visited six of these farms in 2009, three in 2013 and 2015, and 15 as recently as 2021-22. These farms vary in type and size, so they can be described as large, small, conventional, organic, with or without livestock, etc.

Participant observation was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with adult family members – men and women, younger and older, socialised in agriculture before and after 1991. In addition to farmers, I spoke with seven local health care workers and seven agricultural advisors about issues related to agricultural change and observed so-called stress-related illnesses.

In taking a non-medical approach, I followed authors, who moved the research agenda on farmer stress problematic from a mental health perspective into the spaces of the morally, economically and politically distressing agricultural reality as experienced by farmers themselves (Price & Evans 2009; Bryant & Garnham 2014), focussing instead on their lived, ethnographically observed and discursively conveyed distress. In line with ethical research considerations[1], all selected research participants were informed verbally and through a written informed consent form about the purpose of the study and its likely consequences, the identity of the funders, the anticipated use of the data, the potential benefits of the study, and the discomfort that might affect them during the planned discussions. The safety, confidentiality and anonymity of participants was ensured both during the fieldwork by informing them that they could withdraw from participating in the study or discussing issues too sensitive for them at any time, and more recently by removing identifiers from the published study results. Because of these assurances and the strong trust that was built with both the study participants – those I had already met in previous studies and the new participants I would meet on their farms in 2021 and 2022 – additional psychological support for the farmers was not planned.

In this paper, however, I confine myself to the farmers' and agricultural advisors' reflections on what they call «social [support]» and their thoughts on restoring «fair/normal prices» as the overly common and recurring themes that emerged as a result of thematic analysis (Krippendorf 2004) of farmers' moral reasoning about their sufferings. Irrespective of the age, gender and type of farming of the research participants, these two themes shaped their narratives about their constant fears, worries, and anxieties, which they believed might affect their distress in an ever-changing agricultural context. As will be shown below, these farmers' reasoning also proved

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[1] In drafting the consent form, I have followed the 2018 EASA Statement on Data Governance in Ethnographic Projects and the 2017 Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Research Involving People by the University of Ljubljana.

to be «a tactic performed in the moment of the breakdown of the ethical dilemma» (Zigon 2007: 137) in order to achieve both, seemingly barely compatible goals: their well-being and a progressive farm.

«There is too much social [support] in the country!»

The first time I encountered the farmers' reasoning about «the social [welfare state]» was at the very beginning of my fieldwork, when I visited Erni and his wife from farm C to arrange the beginning of my volunteer work on their farm. First, they read and signed the consent form to participate in the study, which stated the desired outcome: «A better understanding and new knowledge of farmer distress that will help develop appropriate psychological support». I summarized their initial response in my ethnographic diary.

> While I was still having coffee with his wife and remembering my last visit in 2015, Erni came into the kitchen. He read the informed consent, recognised me, smiled and winked at me, but immediately exploded, yelling that he used to be poor because he had nothing, while now he is poor too, even though he has a lot. Without pause, he went on to say that the Slovenian and Hungarian prime ministers would soon be married, and when I mistakenly assumed he was criticising the Hungarian prime minister, he began to praise his decision to quickly cut social support from Hungary. Erni explained that now early in the morning across the border [in Hungary] a bus picked up farm workers who were going to mow. Previously, farm workers were to stay home and break their equipment instead of preparing for the hard work. And why? Because they preferred to receive [social] support. Erni suggested that such a practise should be introduced in Slovenia as well, since farmers could not find agricultural workers despite the high percentage of unemployed in the Pomurje region. The unemployed preferred to receive €600 per month instead of working. What a country! Slovenia rewarded non-work and punished hard work (Ethnographic Diary: July 6, 2021 / Farm C, first visit in 2013 and later in 2015).

Despite the high unemployment rate in the Pomurje region, Erni could not understand why, despite the above-average income he offered his workers, nobody else was willing to work on his farm, which had become so advanced. All of the workers on Erni's farm (four family members and six hired laborers) are insured as farmers and are even paid better than farm workers in neighboring Austria. Erni regrets that at the age of 66 he is still doing various jobs to the same extent as when he was younger, rather than now, at this age, being a valued coordinator who merely controls various phases of work. His body is still exhausted, and Erni attributes the lack of workers to the «too good State» that encourages laziness rather than work. His wife Olga (age 60) also greeted me and complained that compared to my last visit in 2015, everyone was working more now (2021), indeed that «the workload is not normal», they were working «too much». Olga agreed that no one in the region was willing to work on their farm, even though they offer their workers a «fair income» and «respectful care». They all sit at the same table day after day, eat first-class meals, get paid more for working on weekends and holidays, and can earn an additional variable part of their income as an incentive.

Surprisingly, almost all the farmers interviewed confirmed Erni's reasoning: in the Pomurje region it is impossible to get labour. There is no one who would be willing to work on a farm because the State guarantees permanent social support to the unemployed. Why should all these people work when they are paid for not working? Since they work on the black market, many of them could even earn more money than someone who is regularly employed.

Farmers also cannot bring anyone onto the farm if they are injured themselves, and if they are insured as farmers, they are entitled to several months of work assistance. They are usually laughed at by regional employment service officials when they ask if anyone is available or when they place an ad for on-farm work assistance. They dismissed my comment that unemployed people are probably not properly qualified to work on farms as nonsense, and emphasised that they would be willing to mentor for free if a potential mentee would at least show a «willingness to work» on their farm. The majority feel that non-farmers «despise» working on a farm, and some referred to their unemployed neighbours in the village who «deliberately walk their dogs along their fields with hands in their pockets and make fun of us farmers who work hard», as farmer Franc (age 73) explained. One farmer even told the local agricultural advisor the story of his neighbour who lives with three unemployed sons who receive «social [support]». One day their father approached the farmer, «You guys get up at five in the morning and slave away, while we get up at eleven and start preparing a barbecue». The farmer confided to the advisor that at that moment, if he had had a gun, he would have killed them all and then himself.

Other agricultural advisors confirmed the farmers' complaints and stressed that with such social support, which is only slightly lower than the minimum wage in the country, it is understandable that the unemployed do not do dangerous and hard work on the farm for the same wage. However, in explaining the labour shortage in rural Pomurje, they also mentioned other possible reasons. One of them was that an average farm in Pomurje cannot financially afford 1 PMWU (Productive Man-Work Unit), or the fact that the number of «pure farmers» in the countryside is rapidly decreasing. As a result, farmers are becoming a minority in a village and can no longer rely on the former neighbourhood help that was always «on hand». Another reason is the increasingly attentive workers who demand higher wages during the peak season, when they have to work 16 hours a day.

Not so rare was the explanation by research participants that unemployed people from Pomurje «out of pride or shame» prefer to work in neighbouring Austria under worse working conditions than on «our farms». Coming from the farms themselves, before 1991 they were employed in more respectful socialist firms throughout Pomurje. However, since 2009, many of these firms have gone bankrupt, while today's farmers are economically better off, receiving several agricultural subsidies to advance their businesses. The economically better position of farmers in society might arouse the «envy» of the now unemployed former workers, who prefer to work on Austrian farms for less money rather than on Slovenian farms.

Regardless of the complaints repeated by the farmers that «we work more than before», that «it is not normal how much work is still necessary», although they constantly improve their mechanisation and production technology, the hard work remains discursively the most important value for them. To work they subordinate their body, mind and well-being, and not the other way round. They only worry about their health when they find that work is not done «on time», not done «right», or not done «at all». In line with this reasoning, they again criticise «social [support]» – the main culprit for their inability to continuously perform the work on their farms. Moreover, they believe that this institution actually supports non-work, which the empirical reality in their local contexts confirms day after day. Almost every research participant described a neighbour, an acquaintance, or a peer who receives social support and yet works illegally at home or abroad. Farmers believe that the State rewards non-work and punishes «hard» and «honest» work like they do every day. Not surprisingly, the local agricultural advisor, who has worked with farmers for 35 years, believes that farmers are too proud to ask for social support when they need it.

> Above all, if a farm was once a well-functioning farm and is no longer, a farmer will not ask for social support. He will not. That is beneath him. If you ask for social assistance, you are a loser. You are a failure. That's not a value. That's a minus. And how can you explain that this pride and the fact that you are capable, that you do not need social support, has always been there in this environment. Social support has always been a shame for a farm.

Farmers (especially men), in turn, attribute the reasons for their ill-being to the increasingly unpredictable nature (weather) that may surprise them and prevent them from performing the «planned work» or completing it «on time» and «properly». Under such circumstances, the entire yield necessary to repay investment debts (loans), without which a farm cannot «move forward», may be at risk. At the same time, farmers are aware that in such circumstances every single family member or farm worker is indispensable, especially in the context of labour shortage and «too much of the social» in the region. That «body and nerves shut down» due to work overload, especially those research participants (mostly farmers' wives employed outside the farm) who took over the work of an injured family member on the farm in case of work accidents emphasised. In doing so, they again regretted the lack of labour in the neighbourhood because of «too much of the social». There are many other reasons for the constant worries and tensions experienced by the study participants during their respective careers, which are more and more related to both trends – the lack of skilled labour in the rural region and the intensification of labour on farms. They do not deny that this suffering can lead to illnesses associated with chronic stress; however, most of them believe that psychological support would only «put out the fire».

«Just prices and the elimination of subsidies are necessary for our well-being!»

As already mentioned, at the very beginning of our meetings, when the research participants were informed about the research project and its objectives, they were asked to reflect on the possibility of introducing psychological support for people in agriculture. At first, they were surprised by the idea and the «external concern» for their own welfare; until now, they said, it had only been about animal welfare. The women immediately welcomed the idea as necessary, but soon after expressed their doubts that «it would not succeed with men», that «farmers would not feel comfortable with such support» because men, unlike women, «keep their difficulties to themselves». Albina (age 54), the wife of an injured farmer who had broken his spine five years ago, complained that he would not even «open up» to her because of his «pride or male upbringing in the village», while Cvetka (age 68) was quite open:

> We women, we are more trustworthy. We can talk more easily, while men do not trust even their close family. A man doesn't talk about a financial crisis, or that a certain machine is broken, or that he is in pain or sick. For men, these are unspoken things. In my opinion, they think they are a head, that they can't be sick, that they can't take risks, but they worry about how we are all going to survive. They are worried about who's going to work and then what's going to work [when they are sick], who's going to take care of all of you, how you are all going to live, you know what I mean?

When discussing stress-related illnesses among farmers, men in particular referred to a «not only our guilt» for this condition and pointed to the embeddedness of farmers in a broader social environment. Ivan (66 years old) is convinced that it is not only the fault of the farmer who finds himself in a «dead end» when he can no longer help himself.

> I don't think only these farmers are guilty. It is a system. What I am trying to tell you? I am saying that it happens that someone else cheats another, for example, a bank, if you believe in a bank. Both a bank and a doctor can let you down. And you go to hell. And in those cases, you can't handle the stress and you really need help. I don't know if only the farmers are guilty. Because if they were guilty, their farms would not be so advanced. Someone else put the brakes on that progress, and the question is whether that's an economic mistake or a political mistake. Of course, a farmer can also contribute to such a mistake.

Similarly, Simon (age 49) emphasized that the real cause of farmers' distress is outside their bodies, although he admitted that farming is a strenuous way of life after all.

> S: When one is young, the body can handle all the stresses well. When one is older, these stresses accumulate in the body [...] Four years ago, I suffered from sore throat several times in a row. Each time I took antibiotics, but shortly after I stopped taking the tablets, the sore throat recurred. This condition lasted for half a year, and I took antibiotics for three months [...] My family doctor prescribed numerous medical examinations, the last of which was a gastroscopy.

> It was found that my stomach was secreting too much acid. I was given tablets, which I take regularly, and the sore throat disappeared.
> D: Would farmers accept psychological support if it were introduced for them?
> S: Well, I cannot deny that it would not be necessary. But I am afraid such support would only mean putting out the fire. You have to start with the extension service, which is completely stuck somewhere, and then move on to the redemption prices, which are bringing many farmers to their knees.

Farmers believe that the State should abolish agricultural subsidies and introduce «normal prices» between them, food processors and traders. Geza (age 39), a livestock farmer, commented on an article published in *Kmečki glas* (*Voice of the Farmers*, December 2021) about the division of the proceeds of a slaughtered bull between a farmer, a butcher (processing industry), and a trader.

> You see, a farmer gets only 45% of the price, the rest is divided between processing and trade. What kind of a cycle is that? You, as a farmer, invest two years of labour and various means to feed and care for the bull so that it reaches the appropriate weight. And what about the butcher? He slaughters the bull and cuts it up in just five to six hours. And a trader? He spends even fewer man-hours putting the meat on the shelves. This division is simply unfair, and you can't compensate farmers' work with subsidies.

Geza is also convinced that subsidies generally put farmers to sleep, as they still account for 70% of the income of an average Pomurje farmer; these farmers, in his opinion, will not survive in the market if subsidies are abolished.

Research participants were generally very upset when talking about unfair prices in the agri-food chain, and often referred to their feelings of being powerless and without negotiable leverage as «price takers». Mihael (age 45), a pig farmer, did not lower his voice until he finished his comment.

> M: When you sell your pigs to the slaughterhouse, someone else sets the price for you, and when you buy pigs, again someone else sets the price. The price is fixed. Take it or go somewhere else. You do not have any power. You only have the choice to buy or not to buy. Now, if I want to sell 20 pigs and I call a butcher, he will tell me €1.5 per 1 kg. If I object and suggest €1.6 per 1 kg, he will refuse and insist on €1.5 or nothing. And I am powerless.
> D: And you are forced to sell them now at a certain age? You cannot sell them later, after a year?

> M: With pigs, I cannot afford to do that. A pig now weighs 130 kg, in a year it will weigh 180 kg, and every day a pig eats 4 kg of feed, it's an expense. [...] Everyone wants to earn their money. You cannot change that, because the traders and buyers, e.g. the butchers, are free in pricing. [...] I always make fun of it when I say that a farmer does not need to calculate. There is no need for mathematics. The prices are already set. Take them or go somewhere else!

His mother Cvetka (age 68), a retired farmer, joined the conversation, summarising that the biggest problem is «the too many employees in agriculture who live at the expense of a farmer».

> You see, we feed a pig, and our pig must have all the necessary documents to meet the criteria of traceability. But when our pig arrives at the slaughterhouse, the traceability is no longer there. Even if you have attended only three elementary school classes, you cannot be so stupid to realise that it is impossible to have Slovenian pork in any grocery store, while the self-sufficiency level of pork in our country is only 30%. The meat is imported from who knows where, repackaged and offered in a grocery store as Slovenian meat. This is nonsense. But a lorry driver who transports the pork must be paid. The one who kills and cuts up a pig must be paid. The one who repackages the pig has to be paid. How many of them did I count? And then there are the shopkeepers and many others who are employed in extension service, in the ministry and in other institutions. All these employees earn their income from our pig.

Older farmers, in particular, emphasised that production is no longer a difficulty today, in post-1991 agriculture. They see the sale as problematic. Irrespective of their expressed criticisms of farming under socialism, they agreed that production and sales were assured in the country at that time, showing a kind of nostalgia for «subsistence security» (Scott 1976). Whatever a farmer produced, he could easily sell through the system of socialist cooperatives before they became «politically corrupted». Either way, however, redemption prices were assured, and farmers could plan their farming activities without difficulty. Today, farmers attribute their sleepless nights to the control of inspectors who verify the implementation of subsidies on the ground, making them «incompetent farmers» or producers. Instead, farmers insist, the State should organise a «buy at a good price», as the older generation of farmers experienced under socialism. Now farmers are forced to sell their produce in neighbouring Austria to keep their income above cost, but they remain frustrated that they cannot fulfil their historic role as «breadwinners of their own nation».

Finally, the discussion of fair prices and subsidies has raised another question: Who is actually a «real farmer»? The research participants pointed out that today only «real farmers» suffer the most as «price takers», as the retired Ivan (age 71) knew very well.

> The real farmer is a farmer who lives only by farming. And he lives in a village. First of all, you have to get along well with everybody, […] honesty, neighbourliness and so on. And you have to have a lot of friends and fellow farmers. Otherwise you can't do much on your own. You always need someone, and you have to follow politics. You have to be healthy and have a good family. Then you can somehow make ends meet. But I always say that a farmer will never make a good deal if someone else is always setting the prices for him. And taxes as much as he can!

However, the advancement of a successful farm requires a rapid response to innovations in various fields, a constant adaptation of cultivation techniques, mechanisation or the effects of climate change, and national rural and agricultural development policies. All these reactions and adaptations require special virtues that only the true farmer possesses. The «bad farmer», on the other hand, does not possess these virtues. He manages his farm poorly, or as Vlado (age 47), an organic farmer, puts it, «He works and works, but the work yields nothing. Such a farmer has messy animals, bad harvests, and poorly managed land». Goran (age 43), a cattle farmer, also pointed out that single male farmers, who are predominant in the countryside today, would not participate in psychoeducation if it were introduced. In his view, their status as single or unmarried men is a sign of their inability to start and maintain a family – a true farmer virtue.

> Usually, such farmers drink a lot and live on their parents' farm. They excuse themselves by saying that they do not have enough time or that they would miss something if they did not work. If they were normal, they would find a wife and talk about their [psychological] difficulties.

Research participants believe that true farmers are a minority in the countryside today, while the majority is made up of «fake farmers», whom they often refer to as «bad farmers» because they are rewarded for «not working» or «giving up farming». The latter often include young farmers who allegedly misuse subsidies from the Young Farmer Settlement Scheme. Such fake farmers, they believe, give up farming immediately after the fifth year of compulsory farming. Each of the research participants knows at least one such farmer in the area. Also, all «hobby farmers» or «afternoon farmers» are not real farmers, as is the case with agricultural extension workers who farm after work in the afternoon. In addition, agricultural advisors are viewed by most farmers as «unfair competitors» to real farmers. Instead of providing on-the-ground advice to real farmers as they did before 1991, they become bureaucrats themselves after 1991 and apply for subsidies in the same tenders as farmers. The fake farmers abuse the subsidy system because they want to «get the unearned capital quickly» and apply for all kinds of subsidies whether they need them or not. Many farmers can be good farmers, but they are not real farmers because they are not necessarily «honest people» or are only interested in their own success. Mira (age 48), an organic farmer, was very clear about this.

> In our village there is a very famous farmer whose farm is completely modernized. You know, there are robots everywhere, even for manure cleaning [...]. But he is not an honest person. He is involved in politics, and he is a representative of the same kind of farmer. But he fights only for his own interests. Only for his own. He doesn't care much about the other farmers [...]. And every time he gets subsidies for everything you can imagine, whether he needs them or not.

Let us return to Erni and his statement that he is poor today, although he has much. Erni is convinced that real farmers are not respected in Slovenia and that quality produced food is not properly appreciated. True farmers are not respected in the country because of «these subsidies, this support that we work hard for». Erni is hurt because «the land that bears fruit is not valued and what comes out of the land is worthless». The proof is «unjust prices».

Discussion: Beyond the psychological, the ethical dimension of farmer distress

In the above analysis, in contrast to the underlying assumptions of psychological support, that typically emphasises omnipotent agency in terms of individual responsibility for the development and recovery from psychological ill-being, I have sought to see agency in terms of ethical notions of blame and responsibility (Laidlaw 2010) in order to relate farmers' distress to their local moral world. Using thematic analysis of «fragmented moments of narrated experience and understanding by a particular group of people during a particular point in time» (Bryant & Garnham 2018: 66), I identified two interrelated themes that study participants repeatedly reflected on in our conversations about their not being well in the current context of farming in Slovenia, and that elicited their ethical judgements.

The theme of «the social [support]» invokes ethics in the communicative actions of research participants – both farmers and agricultural advisors – who create a moral community of hardworking farmers and the blameworthy State that rewards locals with social support for not working. Using terms such as «the too-good State», «fair income», «respectful care», «laziness», «hard and honest work», «the envy», «willingness to work», «despise», «pride», «a shame», «a failure», «a loser», etc. the study participants express their moral judgments and feelings about their everyday observations in relation to those who do not possess their discursively established highest value – honest and hard work – that distinguishes «us – the farmers» from «them – the others». Such a work ethic contributes to the formation of the farmers' «class ethos» (Buchowski 2004: 175), which emphasises hard work as a measure of a person's worth and which the farmers share in contrast to other social groups (classes), as was also observed in the Polish post-socialist countryside (Buchowski 2004; 2009). As could also be observed in post-socialist Poland, agrarian proletarians (former labourers on state farms) were reluctant to serve farmers, while farmers preferred mutual help among themselves over hiring rural proletarians because they did not consider them to be valuable people. Moreover, it was emotionally difficult for rural proletarians to sell their labour to farmers, as if they were selling a part of their soul and not just their labour to real people in their community and not to an abstract state (Buchowski 2004; 2009). In their reflections, the research participants in Pomurje made similar observations: In fact, farmers in Pomurje saw potential workers either as non-hardworking, lazy exploiters of social benefits or as people who, despite having been socialised in hardworking farming in their youth, now do not want to work for them. Under socialism, their fellow villagers left the land and worked in ideologically favoured state firms, whereas now, after 1991, when these firms went bankrupt and they – the farmers as their potential employers – became wealthier, they preferred to work in Austria for lower wages out of (former) pride and (now) shame. But the farmers also feel entrapped. When reflecting on their constant worries, fears and sleepless nights, they located «the social [support]» in their lived experience of hardship and possible stress-related illnesses which they persistently linked to the lack of skilled labour in rural communities and the intensification of work on farms.

Directly confronted with the possibility of introducing psychological support for farmers in Slovenia, the study participants reflected not only on the dilemma of whether such support is necessary for them or not, but also on who or what is actually responsible for their lived anxieties, which turned out to be another theme that provoked ethical judgements among them. The women welcomed the intervention as necessary, but immediately expressed their doubts about the possible reaction of the men. At first glance, this response confirms the discourses of stoicism and resilience that originate in rural masculinity cultures and seek to explain why male farmers generally avoid psychological support. However, as Bryant and Garnham (2014; 2015) and Ramirez-Ferrero (2005) in particular argue in their respective studies, emotions such as pride and shame can be seen as evaluative judgements or culturally mediated «embodied thoughts» (Rosaldo 1984; in Ramirez-Ferrero 2005: 5) that are related to farmers' subjective self-esteem and gender identity and are important for understanding their distress. The authors argue that the discourses on male suicide portray the farmer as a fallen hero who has fallen from a position of prestige to one of dishonour, and as a hero who has lost the battle against adversity (e.g., Garnham & Bryant 2013; Bryant & Garnham 2015). It was also observed that older farmers in particular, who typically valued traditional and hegemonic notions of rural masculinity, experienced the devastating consequences of extreme climate variability and national and global rural and agricultural restructuring as a personal failure, leading to a deterioration in their health, while women, on the other hand, promoted views of traditional masculinity by supporting their husbands and monitoring their health while ignoring their own health needs (Alston 2012). These studies have shown that the farmer's subject position is linked to moral values that, when the viability of the farm is threatened, also threatens his social position and subjective sense of worth.

The above analysis further show that male farmers extended a way of introducing psychological support by attributing moral responsibility for their and farmer distress in general to external factors: «a system», «a bank», «a doctor», «the extension service», «the redemption prices». Guilt for their poor mental condition or even their «dead end», they believe, is shared; it cannot be only theirs. In this way, research participants pointed to the alleged causes of farmer distress, which they also attributed to their weakened social position in society, caused first by «unjust redemption prices» throughout the food chain and second by the unfair distribution of agricultural subsidies to «fake farmers» in a community.

Farmers described numerous examples of their «unfair» social position in the agri-food system and emphasized that it was the State's responsibility to establish more equitable relationships between farmers, food processors, and stores by restoring «normal prices» and eliminating subsidies that demotivate «real, hard-working farmers» and motivate only «fake farmers». Against a backdrop of «take it or leave it» pricing, farmers feel powerless and trapped in a system that leaves them with limited options for their agency and are even exploited by everyone else who lives at their expense. Older farmers long for a «concerned State» and point to the system of socialist cooperatives that offered guaranteed purchase and redemption prices; however, they do not miss the immoral agricultural practices under socialism. In their moral judgements, farmers also point out that they have fallen into a vicious circle of labour intensification in order to maintain their competitive and progressive farms in a way that was not possible under socialism. In doing so, they implicitly echo the observation of other studies that, in addition to the new opportunities brought about by post-socialist conditions in agriculture, farmers are also confronted with the unexpected consequences of the unpredictability of the free market economy (e.g. Buchowski 2009; Krzyworzeka 2013).

Finally, research participants drew clear «moral boundaries» (Sayer 2005; Buchowski 2009) between real and fake or bad farmers. While they mostly attributed immoral characteristics such as «dishonesty», «unfair competition» or «selfishness» to fake farmers, bad farmers were not necessarily viewed in this way. Bad farmers were judged by the appearance of their land, animals, and family, which, in the case of real farmers, must be consistent with their ideas of what is good and right in their community (Burton 2004; Burton *et al.* 2021).

Today, farmers work harder and harder, and the exhaustion of their own bodies and minds remains intertwined with their moral evaluation and performance as «good farmers». Discursively, however, they did not see reducing the amount of work as a possible solution that would hypothetically reduce their hard work or the need for additional work, or improve their distress. On the contrary, farmers insisted that a farm would not develop properly, and they worked not only to earn a living, but also to live well and decently and to position themselves as good farmers in society. Or to conclude this discussion with the words of Milan, an agricultural advisor: «The well-being of farmers would be the feeling that they are fairly paid for the work they do».

Conclusion

In this article, I seek to broaden understanding of the social and moral dimensions of farming that go beyond the psychological nature of so-called farming stress and may underlie farmer distress. Farmers' reasoning about their being well was conveyed and observed through the communicative work, which required them to detach themselves from the unreflective ordinariness of the moral when they were initially confronted with a question to reflect on the possibility of introducing psychological support for farmers in Slovenia. This question elicited their moral judgements, which went beyond the immediately conveyed reasons as to whether such support was necessary or not, to their reflections on the causes of their own or other farmers' not being well, beyond their control. Farmers did not say that they were exposed to the unexpected consequences of the opening of Slovenia to world markets after 1991 and suffered from the fact that their diligent labour input did not automatically turn into profit or their moral capital into economic capital. Rather, they discussed the state's overly generous social support for the lazy, non-hardworking covillagers or unemployed people in the region and sought the solution in the State's act of restoring fair prices in the agricultural and food chain. However, both themes revolved around the work ethic as the main *differentia specifica* through which farmers make ethical judgements and distinctions among themselves and towards others in the observed rural region and society as a whole. In their explanations, they relate the threatened work ethic in today's agricultural reality to their ill-being.

Investigating farmer distress by the ordinary ethics approach shifts the focus from an individual farmer as a carrier of disease, injury or stress-related illness to their moral community as the locus of analysis in relation to farmer ill-being. The article points out that farmer distress can arise from ethical ruptures in the social, political and economic relationships between farmers and the State, which farmers believe rewards and justifies dishonest work or non-work in the region and punishes honest and hard work by farmers through social support systems, the unfair provision of agricultural subsidies and inaction in setting fair prices in the agri-food system. In doing so, farmers discursively construct and make morally culpable the local abusers of the welfare state, the fake farmers and the inactive State, i.e. the circumstances that potentially make their distress a possibility. Such an approach foregrounds the ethical and emotional dimensions of farming and invites problematising the social and political responses to farmers' avoidance of distress through psychological support alone.

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Situated Responsibilities. Ethical Research and Care Practices Among Patient Communities in Italy

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Abstract

In the last two decades, there has been growing discourse – in and around institutions – on specific aspects of scientific research and technological innovation, particularly on the way they tend to be conducted «secludedly», without the possibility of scrutiny or intervention by people outside institutions themselves. The so-called «Responsible Research and Innovation» (RRI) approach aims to rewrite the relationship between scientists and their wider social context, focusing of conducting research «responsibly», which would ideally mean more attuned to societal needs and desires. This contribution tries to discuss what this idea of «responsible research» might concretely mean, and, drawing from empirical research on two patient and caregiver organizations in Italy, aims to show what happens when these ideas of ethical and responsible research are reappropriated by subjects usually excluded from these processes – with the explicit objective of tailoring research and innovation to the concrete need of patient-caregiver communities.

Keywords: responsibility, Responsible Research and Innovation, patient communities, care, biosociality.

Riassunto

Negli ultimi due decenni, si è progressivamente sviluppata una riflessione – all'interno e intorno alle istituzioni – su alcuni aspetti della ricerca scientifica e dell'innovazione tecnologica, in particolare sul modo in cui tendono a essere condotte in modo «isolato», senza la possibilità di controllo o di intervento da parte di persone esterne alle istituzioni stesse. Il cosiddetto approccio della «Ricerca e Innovazione Responsabile» (RRI) mira a riscrivere il rapporto tra gli scienziati e il loro contesto sociale più ampio, concentrandosi sulla conduzione della ricerca «in modo responsabile», che, idealmente, significherebbe più in sintonia con i bisogni e i desideri della società. Questo contributo cerca di discutere cosa possa significare concretamente questa idea di «ricerca responsabile» e, basandosi su una *ricerca empirica su due organizzazioni di pazienti e caregiver in Italia, intende mostrare cosa succede quando soggetti solitamente esclusi da questi processi – con l'obiettivo esplicito di adattare la ricerca e l'innovazione alle esigenze concrete delle comunità di pazienti e caregiver – si riappropriano di queste idee di ricerca etica e responsabile.*

Parole chiave: responsabilità, Ricerca e Innovazione Responsabile, comunità di pazienti, cura, biosocialità.

What is «responsible» about «responsible innovation»?

In the last ten or fifteen years, a new approach to conducting research and innovation has progressively taken root – maybe we could call it a new «paradigm», as it aims to radically shift the priorities of these processes. Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), as this approach is called, wishes to go, quoting the title of an influential paper, «from science in society to science for society, with society» (Owen, Machnaghten & Stilgoe 2012), moving away from a strictly hierarchical way of doing scientific research (and technological innovation), and towards more horizontal and collaborative practices. This approach is increasingly popular in EU institutions, where from the early 2010s and especially with the Horizon 2020 program it has become an influential way of rethinking research projects.

In the RRI perspective, there is a «traditional» way of doing research and innovation that puts all the agency in the hands of a small number of subjects. From the decision about the problem to be solved or the issue to be explored, to the results produced, the entire process of «making» research or innovation is often hidden away behind the walls of institutions that usually show only the final product. And this process is entirely in the hands of experts, significantly limiting the input lay people (even those directly impacted by the results) can have. Ethical concerns, where they are present, are usually preoccupied with what we *don't* want science and innovation to do – with risks and unintended consequences (Owen *et al.* 2013). Underpinning this «traditional» way of doing research are a few key assumptions. First, a sort of instrumental representation of research and innovation: they are, in and of themselves, simply «tools» and as such morally neutral. They can be misused, and thus their diffusion and accessibility has to be controlled, but they don't have any innate ethical or moral content. What is innately moral (or rather, innately good) is scientific and technological advancement: «progress» gives us more tools to face structural and everyday challenges. The possibility of negative consequences doesn't invalidate the ultimate need to pursue progress. Lastly, and maybe most significantly, scientists and innovators should have the freedom to shape the direction of this progress, owing to their specific expertise. Institutions should intervene later, to eventually course-correct for unexpected consequences, but shouldn't substantially limit the autonomy of researchers. Society has a largely passive position in these processes: lay people are end-users or beneficiaries of research and innovation.

What is, then, the proposed paradigm shift? The core objective of the RRI approach is to invert these assumptions, and ultimately center the entire process of research and innovation on its ethical dimensions.

> Responsible Research and Innovation is a transparent, interactive process by which societal actors and innovators become mutually responsive to each other with a view on the (ethical) acceptability, sustainability and societal desirability of the innovation process and its marketable products (in order to allow for a proper embedding of scientific and technological advances in our society) (Owen, Machnaghten & Stilgoe 2012: 753).

Rather than positioning progress as a value in itself, RRI focuses on its wider desirability. Ethical concerns are not just relegated to risks and unintended consequences – they should address what we *want* science to do as much as what we don't want it to do. As Owen et al. argue (Owen et al. 2013; Owen, Machnaghten, and Stilgoe 2012), a feature of the discourse on responsible research and innovation has its focus on their purposes, with how experts decide the «right» research agenda – and for whom it's «right». If the governance of science and innovation is usually closed down and restricted to specialized institutions, RRI aims to open it up to wider deliberation, involving the public as much as possible since the early stages of research and innovation processes. This involvement would inevitably foreground the political dimension of these processes, and of RRI in general: what is «right» can only emerge in a public, or hybrid, forum (Callon, Lascoumes & Barthe 2009), and with a public and participated debate. In this way, RRI re-frames what «progress» can mean: not simply additive of scientific knowledge or technological tools, but the answering to wider societal needs and problems – collectively and collaboratively defined.

A key aspect of the discourse on RRI is the reframing of what «responsibility» means. A concept that appears frequently in the literature is *responsiveness*: institutional actors that participate in research and innovation processes should strive to be attentive to societal needs, and formalize forms of public engagement to foreground these needs. Being «responsive» in this context means actively listening to a broad range of stakeholders, and not leaving the listening to the autonomy and initiative of individual researchers or innovators, but integrating collaborative practices and public engagement into the mechanisms that govern research and innovation in general. This means creating new responsibilities and new responsible subjects. In the RRI perspective, scientists and researchers become «responsible» in a variety of different ways, and most importantly to different people. If the «traditional» representation of scientific responsibility is mostly concerned with professional deontology, and as such is directed towards the scientific community and institutions, RRI's responsibility is mainly focused on society at large. Scientists are responsible of looking for and pursuing the «right impacts» for their work; they are responsible of engaging with stakeholders at all levels; they are responsible of being reflexive throughout their work. But it's not just scientists: all actors involved in research and innovation processes become responsible in the same way. Funders, policymakers, businesses should equally be responsive to societal needs, engage with stakeholders, be reflexive. The reshaping of responsibility widens both the scope and the subjects involved.

> The framing of responsibility itself is perhaps one of the greater intellectual challenges for those wrestling with the concept of responsible innovation. (…) Reframing responsibility in the context of innovation as a collective, uncertain and unpredictable activity is focusing attention on dimensions of responsibility such as care and responsiveness which are values- and not rules-based, allowing for discussion concerning purposes and accommodating uncertainty (Owen, Machnaghten & Stilgoe 2012: 756).

Care is the other keyword. RRI seems to articulate a sort of ethics of care (Tronto 1993) in its rethinking the how and the why of research and innovation. They become, in a way, care practices (Mol 2008), not simply adapted and adaptable to specific needs but actively attentive to the foregrounding of needs. In this perspective, doing research and innovation is a way of *taking care* of social ills or structural difficulties – and they should arise from a «collective duty of care» (Owen, Machnaghten & Stilgoe 2012: 756) that all institutional actors involved in these processes share.

This, at least, is the ideal representation of this new approach. Radically opposing the «ivory tower» attitude of scientists and innovators, RRI suggests the need to embed research in society, to make it more participated and align it to concrete social needs. However, concretely acting on this perspective can be significantly harder. What forms of engagement could, for example, actually rewrite the power imbalance between stakeholders in research and innovation processes? If institutions and experts remain the ones exclusively in charge of defining rules, parameters, and limitations of public engagement, if participation can only occur inside very specific borders, RRI could simply end up as a new name for the status quo. This contradiction is, I believe, evident in the way literature on RRI puts the burden of transformation entirely on institutional actors. While this is inevitable, up to a point – they currently have all the initiative and resources – this initiative is precisely what doesn't seem to change. Under RRI, lay people aren't able to proactively influence institutions and scientists; they have to wait for scientists and institutions to come to them. The contradiction seems entangled with the way we do research and innovation. It's already significantly difficult to abandon the so-called «deficit model» of the public understanding of science, in which experts assume a strictly pedagogical role towards lay people, communicating the «right» knowledge (Bucchi 2015). Even more difficult would be not just abandoning this hierarchical view of knowledge, granting equal legitimacy to the more experiential knowledge that lay people possess (Arksey 1994), but also integrating this knowledge and the practices it brings into the scientific process at all levels.

This doesn't mean that the discourse on RRI and its reframing of responsibility aren't worthy of consideration. Maybe, the debate itself is more significant, at least now, than its practical translations. It's not hard to imagine why discourses on the responsibility of scientific research and technological innovation are proliferating in this specific historical moment. The so-called «move fast and break things» attitude especially towards technological advancements has had unexpected and wide-ranging consequences – from the disruptive effects of social media to more recent doubts about large language models and generative AI[1]. Renewed attention to the processes and purposes of research and innovation signals a

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[1] LLMs and generative AI seem to be particularly significant contexts in which to explore meanings of «responsible innovation», to which I can only gesture at here. On the one hand, we've seen the proliferation of debate around «good» uses of AI, especially focusing on the sourcing of the training data and on the accuracy of answers produced by tools like ChatGPT. On the other hand, these preoccupations arrived after many of the problems of generative AI had already presented themselves – from the indiscriminate scraping of data without any considerations of attribution and

more generalized preoccupation towards the social meaning of technological and scientific progress. And, more importantly for us, this debate isn't confined to institutional spaces. Other actors have adopted a similar language to RRI, thinking about how research and innovation can be carried out outside the traditional contexts of institutions and businesses – and how it can be carried out in the «right» way (Arnaldi, Crabu & Magaudda 2022).

This paper will explore the work of two such actors, two patient organizations active mainly in Italy. It draws from a research project conducted between 2021 and 2023. Due to Covid-related restrictions spanning about half of the project, in addition to the specific structure of the organizations in question, a significant part of this research has been conducted online, participating to remote meetings and events and, where possible, observing the interactions that members of these organizations have in their own online spaces, sometimes specific websites, often social media. Interviews have also been conducted, partially online and partially in person. Participants have been recruited mostly through word of mouth, starting from the core members of each organization and widening the circle from there, to other members and to professionals (mostly in the healthcare sector) that have worked with these organizations. More specifically, observations in this paper are mostly based on conversations and interviews with caregivers in both organizations in question, on interactions on social media channels pertaining to these organizations, and on the documentation produced by the organizations themselves.

Literature on patient organizations has already shown different ways in which these entities question the «truths» of biomedicine and of healthcare institutions, both on the practical, therapeutic front and on the scientific knowledge front (e.g. Epstein 1996; Rabeharisoa & Callon 2004). Here, I wish to focus on how these two organizations articulate ideas of responsibility in their everyday activity, operating mainly outside the range of both public health institutions and biomedical or pharmaceutical companies. If ideas of responsible research are predicated on a more responsive and attentive relationship between scientists and society at large, do people who are both subjects and objects of research, who aim to produce knowledge and innovation that is immediately impactful on their own everyday life,

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compensation to authors, to so-called «hallucinations» of chatbots that confidently recite incorrect information.

embody these ideas? How do they act in an ethical way? If, as Veena Das argues, moral and ethical concepts don't have any inherent meaning, but they acquire meaning in their situated, everyday use (Das 2015), I aim to explore what specific kind of «responsibility» emerges from the care practices of these organizations.

Distributed knowledge, distributed care

The first case is that of a voluntary association that I'll call Libre[2], dedicated to the support to everyday care of diabetes, and specifically to the use of technological devices that facilitate care. The organization was founded in 2014 by a software developer, Francesco, after his daughter was diagnosed with diabetes.

> My daughter went into diabetic coma and our life radically changed. When we came back home, I started furiously looking for information on the Internet, about diabetes, about diabetes in children, about what I could do to take care of her. And I found out that most of the things that are available online are for adults, and the few I could gather about children with diabetes didn't give me any practical information that could be useful in everyday care.

One of the main difficulties that Francesco reported in the first weeks and months after his daughter's diagnosis was the unavailability of information about her glycemic levels. «Sensors and receivers[3] are relatively limited technologies», Francesco told me, «because I need to be close to my daughter at all times to check if everything's fine. I can't leave her at kindergarten, because I don't know if the staff is prepared to deal with a glycemic crisis». Looking around online, he eventually found a solution to his specific problem, particularly suited to his specific skills, in NightScout, an open source software that through the «hacking» of sensors and receivers allows these devices to automatically upload their data to the cloud, where it can be accessed even without specialized equipment.

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[2] This, like all other proper nouns of people and organizations, is a pseudonym.

[3] Sensors are wearable devices, usually attached to the arm or the thigh, that transmit blood glucose levels to specific receivers, often through radio waves. They are the main instrument that allows for a constant monitoring of glycemia, and as such are frequently used by diabetics. Another frequently used device is the microinfusor, another wearable device that periodically releases insulin and helps with the management of blood glucose levels.

NightScout development itself is an interesting example of user-led development of a tool oriented to the specific needs of caregivers.

> NightScout got its start in the Livonia, N.Y., home of John Costik, a software engineer at the Wegmans supermarket chain. In 2012, his son Evan was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at the age of four. The father of two bought a Dexcom continuous glucose monitoring system, which uses a hair's width sensor under the skin to measure blood-sugar levels. He was frustrated that he couldn't see Evan's numbers when he was at work. So he started fiddling around (quoted in von Hippel 2017: 2).

The software started with the encounter of a few caregivers (mostly parents) of diabetic children, that were looking for something that would help the former monitor the latter's condition – mainly, glycemic levels – without being overbearing. Most of the first developers were software engineers or programmers, individually working on jerry-rigged tools combining sensors and receivers with consumer-grade electronic devices, like smartphones and other smart home assistants. They met on social media, where many were talking about their problems, and sharing their discoveries and results. After a few of them started coordinating their efforts, NightScout ceased being only a homebrewed system and became a community, gathered mainly around a Facebook page of the same name, with not only a growing number of active developers, but a wider range of users without a technical background, but that were also looking around for this kind of tool to use in their everyday care. One of them was Francesco.

«When I found NightScout, it was a relatively new system, and I could find nothing in Italian about it or similar software. So I decided to use my technical knowledge to write a guide, and that's how Libre started». The association began as nothing more than a Facebook group, where Francesco could share his expertise and experiments in using NightScout to check his daughter's glycemia, and possibly involve other parents or caregivers in the process. «It wasn't hard, in the beginning, to find people who needed the help, who could benefit from something like NightScout», Francesco told me, «and the group grew quickly. And with more people, we started doing more things». After a few months, the Facebook group became a website, a space that could house a plurality of activities carried out by the members of the association. The core objective remained the dissemination of and support for the use of technological devices applied to everyday care for diabetes – NightScout, first of all, but also everything else that Francesco and the other members of the association deemed fit to test and recommend. However, the community around Libre grew not only through the joining of caregivers, but also of adult diabetic patients and professionals who work with diabetics, from doctors and nurses, to psychologists, to lawyers. This way, the association tries to complement its work on diabetes and technology with other aspects of everyday care, from strictly biomedical ones to psychological and emotional ones, to bureaucratic and legal ones. The website has, for example, sections on the Italian legislation on disability and how it applies to diabetics and their caregivers; or a section dedicated to psychological support for diabetic children and adolescents; or a section in which both adult patients and caregivers can talk about their experience with chronic disease or everyday care. «We are a voluntary association and we want to remain one» argued Francesco, «so we won't ever ask for money or any other kind of material contribution. What we ask for is that if you have any kind of skill or expertise that can be useful you share it with others, whenever you can».

Knowledge sharing is, in general, the main activity of Libre. The website of the association is structured as a database of information produced and freely shared by its members. The involvement of professionals has been useful to widen the range of support that Libre is capable of offering – through information that is legitimated by the authority of people with officially sanctioned expertise, such as licensed physicians and lawyers. However, the association's main interest, that of technology and specifically remote monitoring systems, remains the purview of amateur developers and researchers. And, in a sense, this compartmentalization of not only knowledge but legitimacy (both epistemological and moral) is something that Libre actively pursues.

> Often, doctors aren't aware of «unofficial» systems developed by the wider community of patients and caregivers. So, they can't help us spread the word around. We try, I try to explain as much as I can, especially when a general practitioner asks, but these systems remain unofficial, so they don't really promote them as much. It's mostly other diabetics or caregivers that promote the work of the association, and we like it that way. We don't want to become affiliated with health institutions or pharmaceutical companies; we like to be independent as much as we can.

The association is not directly antagonistic towards doctors and other healthcare professionals, nor is it critical towards the knowledge produced by «mainstream» science and its related actors. However, the members of Libre consider mainstream science incomplete: the perspective of doctors and scientists might be more accurate in regards to the biological dimension of the disease, but is unable to seriously consider the experiential dimension, and hardly even takes into account the material, relational, social aspects of everyday care. That is where Libre aims to intervene – even though some collaboration with «sanctioned» expert is present, most of the knowledge disseminated by the association is eminently experiential (Borkman 1976; Mahr 2021), acquired through the everyday process of caring for a chronic disease, or living with it. This experiential knowledge concerns mainly the minutiae of ordinary care, with again a particular focus on the uses of technological devices, both official and unofficial, and their possible consequences. Active, if controlled, experimentation with these devices is encouraged. Most of the times, «experimentation» means thorough testing of commercially available device: Libre is always looking for diabetics and caregivers that are willing to try new sensors, receivers, microinfusors. The first objective is a sort of verification of official information – again, the association isn't opposed to biomedical knowledge (and, as such, to the information provided by the manufacturers of these devices), but it always aims to independently check what, for example, a sensor can do and how it can be integrated into everyday care practices. But another important form of experimentation concerns the use of new devices in tandem with homebrewed systems such as NightScout. Being «unofficial» software, unexpected complications or errors might manifest in their use with different biomedical devices, and it's always up to the community of users – in the case of Libre, mostly caregivers but in some cases adult patients – to verify eventual problems and collaboratively search for solutions. This is, for example, how Francesco ended up developing his own remote monitoring system.

> NightScout is a very complex system to set up… you need some technical knowledge or to be very careful in how you connect the different devices to your computer or your phone. This is why I started with a step-by-step guide, but it still was a significant roadblock for many. So I started working on something different, something easier… and ended up making an app, basically. It's less capable than NightScout in terms of raw features, and being just me working on it it's also less compatible with sensors. But it's usable with the most common ones, and it's far easier for people with less technical skill. It's also easier to connect with other smart devices, not just your phone.

While we were talking, he turned around and asked a smart speaker for his daughter's glycemia. «See? This is what I mean. She's at school now, and I can be confident that she's ok». He showed me other devices that can give him the same information. «I'm trying to be thorough. If I can be informed whenever I need about my daughter's condition, I can intervene in any situation necessary».

Through the distributed production of knowledge about technology applied to diabetes, and especially about the care practices it allows, the members of Libre become «lay experts» on the disease (Arksey 1994; Rabeharisoa, Moreira & Akrich 2014), claiming a form of expertise that has a different epistemological foundation from that of mainstream science:

> The ability of lay people to identify changes in their bodies, as citizen scientists for example, rests on intimate bodily experiences. Their epistemic groundings is founded in the intimacy of bodily perceptions. It is not reason at work, but knowing one's own body; not objective facts, but subjective sensations; not cold experiments, but individual experience (Mahr 2021: 36).

This «epistemic grounding» on bodily, intimate experience works for the patients that reflect and act on their condition, that experiment with the instruments of care at their disposal, and that try to analyze the results of this experimentation (Barbot 2006); but it also works for caregivers. Taking care is not a disembodied experience – rather, it's a form of engagement *with* the body of someone else *through* our own (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017), and as such produces analogous forms of situated, intimate knowing.

> The aim is not so much to pursue a «counter-science», but to generate complementary knowledge, which on the one hand underlines one's own concerns and experiences, but on the other hand should also add a new facet to the knowledge of science (Mahr 2021: 124).

The case of Libre (and, similarly, the next case I'll talk about) underscores how much of the bodily experience of illness is shared in the dwelling of the everyday. In the discourse around diabetes, there's even a specific concept to indicate the way the disease affects the people around the patient: T3, or «type 3», is the primary caregiver for someone with type 1 diabetes (the most severe). It's particularly significant, in this case, the use of a language that explicitly refers to the biomedical categorization of the disease – it signals continuity with the «recognized» types of diabetes, it argues that this is also a social pathology, that it «infects» relationships as well as bodies. It forces caregivers to adjust and shape their everyday on the needs of the patient, to be constantly prepared, to negotiate with every other aspect of their life, to talk to (and argue with) doctors, public health administrators, teachers. But it also affect caregivers' bodies – going without sleep, or pushing through pain and illness to provide adequate care. Francesco defines himself as a «T3 father» first and foremost. His objective isn't to redefine biomedical categorizations of diabetes, but to use his specific knowledge – *experiential* knowledge, contingent on his specific care practices – to open up new spaces for care (Mol 2008). The epistemic grounding of Libre's practices is on the caregivers' status as T3 – not directly affected by diabetes as a disease, but still immersed in its consequences as an illness.

The specific attention that Libre gives to technology applied to everyday care, and not only to the *use* of technology but also to the *active shaping* of technological devices, defines a space of expertise and experience that the association claims as legitimately its own, and through which it aims to gain social capital in its interactions with healthcare professionals and biomedical researchers. This means trying – struggling – to see the use of unofficial devices and systems recognized as a legitimate form of care, even though it places both the patient and the caregiver outside (or at least on the border) of biomedical science and public health intervention. A particularly interesting aspect of this struggle concerns the safety of the «hacked» devices that members of Libre use. Biomedical devices have to undergo a process of evaluation and certification that assures doctors, patients, and caregivers that the risks are minimal, or at least controlled, and that the results are accurate and reproducible – in the case at hand, that sensors give accurate information about blood glucose levels. Regulatory bodies and their certification procedures aren't free of critical points: clinical trials, for example, have repeatedly shown their limitations, such as in the scramble to find enough subjects suitable for participation that has complicated the already existing biases in the selection of these subjects and in the inherently partial results they produce (e.g. Petryna 2006; 2013). The same is true for the testing of technological devices that are used for therapeutic purposes. Regulation and certification aren't a guarantee of efficacy of care; they are, however, a way that health institutions have of taking responsibility – through certification, «sanctioned» experts use their legitimate knowledge to support the adoption of specific drugs or devices, and thus make themselves accountable for it. By hacking sensors, receivers, and microinfusors, the members of Libre are, in a way, rejecting this assumption of responsibility, and taking it for themselves. Another member of Libre, Cesare, recounted of his experimentation with creating devices for everyday care.

> I made this sort of alarm clock […] that shows me my daughter's glycemic levels when I ask for it. And on these numbers I decide her everyday therapy. I mean, I'm confident of the usefulness of this thing, but on paper I shouldn't necessarily trust those numbers. Nobody *knows* if they are correct. But many diabetics and caregivers use devices like this in their everyday care, and most everything works out. These systems are made by people with diabetes and used every day by thousands. If problems arise, there's a community that gives support 24/7. I think this is worth as much as any official certification.

Francesco told me similar things. «We always make it very clear that the things we promote aren't certified», he said, «but also that there's an active community that is constantly helping with any problems that we might encounter». Especially where software is concerned, «the community of developers is always working on a new version, on correcting bugs. If an official device is defective, you might have to wait months for a new one». In rejecting the responsibility of health institutions, members of Libre make themselves *responsible subjects*, actively engaged in ensuring the «quality» of the care devices they promote. The «distributed» knowledge of the community around Libre becomes the assurance that is lost in manipulating and hacking mass-produced (and officially certified) devices.

From a wider perspective, the shifting of responsibilities also means envisioning forms of care that themselves have a different grounding from those based on «expert» biomedical knowledge. Forms of care that foreground the relational and social dimensions of diabetes, that account for the practicalities of caregiving and the ordinary obstacles to living a «good life» even with chronic disease, and that emerge first of all through the collaborative development of technology. As Annemarie Mol argues, «attuned» care for chronic disease necessitates non-linear and open-ended forms of support for patients (Mol 2008; Zigon 2017). «Attunement», in this case, doesn't simply stem from the possibility to «choose», to express a preference in everyday care – it's enacted through the opening of boundaries, through «mak[ing] space for what is not possible» (Mol 2008: 22). By focusing on the distributed knowledge of its community, Libre widens the possibility space for care practices, along the same distributed lines that cross and connect its members.

Producing knowledge, diversifying care

The second case I want to reflect on is that of Strike, a foundation that promotes scientific research and technological innovation concerning cerebral palsy (CP)[4] in children. As with Libre, the foundation was created by caregivers, specifically the parents of a child with CP – but in this case, it was created initially to share the experience of caregiving with other people, and to give support especially to parents in the same situation.

> It began in a kind of random way, in 2013. We had the opportunity to publicly talk about our experience with our son, who was two at the time. We, my husband and I, we were on stage, and started talking very honestly about our difficulties, how we couldn't find anyone who could tell us what we could do, even what CP could mean for our son in his future. The talk had some resonance, because after that other parents and caregivers started contacting us to tell us their own stories, often similar to ours. So we thought, we have to do something.

This is how Federica, one of the founders of Strike and its president during my research, recounted the inception of the foundation. Strike was founded in 2014, as a voluntary association, and, like Libre, was initially little more than a Facebook community, dedicated in this case exclusively to relatives and caregivers of children with CP. The group still exists in the same form, and it's still only for parents and caregivers. While the organization is now far larger than it was at the beginning, and – as we'll see – has a number of collaborations with physicians and academic researchers, that space has maintained the same objective and the same structure: a place of sharing, mutuality and self-help, where caregivers talk about their everyday experience with caring for their children, without necessarily involving doctors or any other kind of «expert». Amongst the transformations that Strike has undergone, many of which have sidelined the more grassroots and community aspects of its work, the Facebook group – together with other virtual spaces of everyday sharing – has remained mostly a *communitas* in the Turnerian sense (Turner 2004): a group of peers with a shared

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[4] Cerebral palsy is a complex neurological disease usually caused by perinatal stroke. Consequences can be wide-ranging, both in their nature and in their severity, but they usually entail either impairment in motor functions, in speech, or in cognitive functions. Rehabilitative therapy can mitigate these consequences, but the damage is often irreversible.

sense of their ordinary life, that identify with common (moral) values and stances and that actively participate in each other's lives. And in this kind of *communitas* the space for experts is minimal. As another member of the group, Alessia, told me, physicians are often quick to dismiss insights or observation made by caregivers, because they aren't validated by scientific knowledge or by rigorous research, but «only on personal experience».

> They will say, did Doctor Google told you this? And yeah, sometimes we look things up on the internet, but more often than not it's something we talked about among ourselves, it's the lived experience of another parent, or my own. What they don't understand, or don't want to, is that they have studied, but we live this disease on our skin, every day of our lives, so maybe we know a thing or two about it.

Again, this knowledge is legitimated by intimate, bodily experience (Mahr 2021), and struggles to be recognized as valuable by experts both in the definition of everyday problems connected to CP and in the discussion or implementation of possible solutions. This is why Strike still has a space dedicated exclusively to caregivers – a space where the experiential can be talked about without fear of judgment, of being labeled in some way «anti-science». But this very struggle for legitimacy is also the reason why a considerable amount of effort and resources of the foundation have gone, especially in the last few years, to projects that foster cooperation between patients, caregivers, and experts. If Libre asks for voluntary collaboration from experts, but sidelines their perspective in its main activity, Strike instead aims to push for hybrid spaces (Callon, Lascoumes & Barthe 2009) in which an intersection of expert and experiential can create new pathways for both scientific research and everyday care.

A specific project that Strike tried to realize a few years ago is particularly illustrative of where the foundation wants to take this intersection. One of the most significant problems that people with CP face is the profoundly unequal distribution of healthcare services across Italy, particularly where it concerns rehabilitative therapy for both motor and cognitive functions – something that caregivers in the community around Strike are particularly attentive to. Especially for those living in the Southern regions of Italy, finding suitable clinics is often an uphill battle.

> During pregnancy, when I discovered that my daughter had this problem… they advised me to move to Roma or Milano. With my husband we had just moved

> to Puglia, and we couldn't find anyone… so we moved to Milano for childbirth, and then went back to Puglia… after a few years, we decided to move to Milano for good. I know it's nobody's fault, but I can't risk my daughter's health.

Stories like this one, from Rosa, another caregiver of Strike's community, are the reason why the foundation expends considerable effort to create alternative pathways for everyday care, ones that don't necessarily rely on local public health services, or even, in some instances, don't expect people to move at all. This last one is the case of Symmetry, one of the main projects of Strike, that aimed to create a platform to remotely conduct a form of physical rehabilitation. «We read an article about mirror neurons», Federica told me, «and when we discovered that the research team was Italian, we went and talked to them. We were thinking about a way of taking these discoveries out of the lab». The best way, according to Federica, was trying to involve neuroscientists from the very beginning of the project, to ensure the scientific rigor of the entire process. Alberto, a neurologist that worked on Symmetry, recounted the beginning of the project:

> The initial idea was to create something that could remotely pair children with similar levels of motor function, and let them do rehab work together, under the pretense of play. […] Strike was very focused on the care and communication aspect of it all: they wanted something to give back to their community. We wanted to understand more about mirror neurons and motor rehabilitation. So there was some friction, especially at the start.

In the different perspectives of Federica and Alberto are visible the different, sometimes divergent, logics of research and innovation of patients/caregivers and institutions. For Federica, the guiding principle is that of care: Strike aims to represent the needs of people with CP and their caregivers, and to widen the spectrum of available care. Once again, this is a logic of open-endedness and attention (Mol 2008), that focuses on the specific and granular aspects of the act of ordinary caring. On the other hand, for Alberto the focus point is knowledge production, and «validated» knowledge at that. Therapeutic intervention is, in this perspective, secondary to the accuracy of the data collected and the rigor of their interpretation; for Strike, instead, it's the scientific validity of the results that's simply a means to an end, that of giving support and care opportunities to caregivers.

But it's not simply an inversion of the priorities of research and innovation. Like Libre, Strike aims to frame the production of experiential knowledge as complementary to the work of sanctioned experts and scientists – but, as already noted, by creating an hybrid forum for discussion and collaboration (Callon, Lascoumes & Barthe 2009). Symmetry is a concrete example of such a forum: the project moves from what Strike (and, specifically, Federica) perceived as a need of the community, rather than from the wish to know more about CP. Not only that, the form that the project took was, again, strongly argued for by Federica and her husband because it could result in a different and more accessible way of doing rehabilitation. Expanding the boundaries of care, in this perspective, means not only creating new instruments and practices, but «attuning» these practices to a wider spectrum of needs. If the interests of experts and scientists is usually focused exclusively on the disease itself, as an organic entity, the interests of «experts of experience» (Viehöver, Wehling & Roche 2015) is often more holistic, and includes a plurality of trajectories of care (Mahr 2021). So, Symmetry was planned as an effective way of doing motor rehabilitation remotely – not only creating new possibilities for therapeutic intervention but also compensating for unequal access to institutional care. But the «remote» part aims to compensate for a wider range of structural inequalities, for example in being economically more accessible in addition to physically more accessible; or in lightening the work of primary caregivers – very often women who are forced to abandon their jobs to dedicate themselves exclusively to care.

This is the specific way Strike frames its own responsibility towards its community, and towards people with CP in general. The foundation rejects the monopoly that experts claim on legitimate knowledge on the disease, but they don't see themselves as antagonistic or even alternative to what Michel Callon and others call «secluded research» (Callon, Lascoumes & Barthe 2009), research that is conducted only inside the walls of academia or of other institution, without contact or collaboration with (in this case, patient) communities. Instead, they aim to «open up» the space of secluded research and introduce different criteria for evaluating the utility, the impact, the accuracy of the data collected and the results produced. By pushing for a wider range of considerations in directing biomedical research and innovation, by centering attention to the complexities of everyday care, Strike tries to bring up issues that often remain outside the purview of institutional research, and involve experts and scientists in the search for solutions.

Active collaboration means access to more resources than the average patient organization. While, for example, Libre has to make do with voluntary work, from its community of patients and caregivers and from the experts that are willing to freely help, Strike can organize multiple research projects with full-time researchers – it's the case of Alberto, that was fully employed on Symmetry for the year he spent on the project. However, more intertwined collaboration means more opportunities for the different logics to clash, as we've already noted. And again Symmetry proves to be a significant example, in its conclusion and in the way it's narrated by Federica and Alberto respectively. The latter declared himself satisfied with the results: findings on the effectiveness of remote rehabilitation were significant, and the research also came with interesting results on the perception the children had of their own body. In both cases, neuroscientists involved managed to publish the findings in scientific journals. On the other hand, Federica was frustrated by the inability to keep going, to create something that could actually be used by caregivers and children with CP. After about a year, funds dried up and while on the research part the work of data analysis and publication went on, Strike found itself with an instrument for rehabilitation that seemed to be effective, but couldn't be made accessible to patients. «If we're not sustainable, if we're unable to give back, what's the point of doing all this?».

(Bio)socially responsible

In his landmark essay *Artificiality and Enlightenment*, Paul Rabinow describes a new mode of self-fashioning, that he calls *biosociality*:

> In the future, the new genetics will cease to be a biological metaphor for modern society and will become instead a circulation network of identity terms and restriction loci, around which and through which a truly new type of autoproduction will emerge, which I call «biosociality.» If sociobiology is culture constructed on the basis of a metaphor of nature, then in biosociality nature will be modeled on culture understood as practice (Rabinow 1996: 99).

The circulation of biomedical knowledge, concepts, and representations allows, Rabinow argues, for the construction of social identities through their reappropriation – communities emerge not only through social-biological concepts such as race or gender, but through the sharing of biological characteristics that are re-signified in a cultural, situated way. In a context in which disabilities or chronic pathologies aren't simply biological facts but imply a complex network of social, economic, even moral positions, they can also become instrumental in the construction of social bonds and personal relationships. Patient communities can be considered and articulation of biosociality: they are created through the appropriation of biomedical knowledge, that is used as a basis not only for the shaping of one's social identity, but also to structure a (social, political) praxis. Rabinow himself identifies them as a salient example. «There already are, for example, neurofibromatosis groups whose members meet to share their experiences, lobby for their disease, educate their children, redo their home environment, and so on. That is what I mean by biosociality» (Rabinow 1996: 102).

Both Libre and Strike, I would argue, constitute biosocial communities. They are, in a significant part, *virtual* communities – neither organization has a geographically-situated base, and they mostly operate and share experiences on online platforms. This means mostly being active on social media: as we've seen, both had their start on Facebook, aggregating people who were struggling with similar problems on everyday care. But they both tried to shape their virtual spaces to accommodate the need of an actual community. On the one hand, they redefined the rules of engagement and interaction on social media, by – for example – restricting access to information posted on Facebook, and implementing informal vetting processes to control who can access private spaces, and who can consider themselves actually «part» of the community. On the other hand, while these «official» spaces are usually the main point of interaction between members, they are not the only one: members often establish smaller-scale relationships outside the organizations' main spaces, and through these relationships offer each other different forms of support in their ordinary care practices. While the use of online platforms inevitably shapes what kinds of relationships are possible, both Libre and Strike struggle to find ways of reappropriating these platforms and use them as instruments towards their own needs, prioritizing the connection between members and the sharing of experiences of illness and care.

The key point of biosociality, as Rabinow argues, is the centrality of a (bodily) condition in the shaping of the subjectivities of members of the community. And in the case of Strike and Libre it's evident that the conditions in question affect much more than only the people who are chronically ill. Even the lives of caregivers, even their social identity and self-representation, are profoundly shaped by chronic pathology. Riccardo, the other co-founder of Strike, was very explicit about how their son's condition was affecting their own:

> We were in a worse shape than [him]… you think there's something wrong with you, with what you've done, you think you're a total failure… the trauma is double, first because you can't process what happened, what your child has, and then when you're a bit better, and you think more about it, you see the shape of it… how will he do things when we're gone? From then, your life is preparing for that, ultimately is just preparing for that.

The same is true for Libre. As I've noted above, the notion of «T3» is used explicitly to mirror biomedical language and categories concerning diabetes, and to underscore the social and relational dimension that the disease has – going so far as to «infect» (relationally, morally) the people who take care of the sick person. Francesco's subjectivity is profoundly shaped by his being a «T3 father». And even his own expertise as a software developer is in large part dedicated to taking care of his daughter (and, by extension, to working on support for diabetic patients). If, from Rabinow's perspective, biosociality is the sharing of experiences, collective advocacy, education and reshaping of the everyday around a disease, then Libre and Strike – with all other caregiver organizations – are biosocial communities. Biosociality allows subject to actively re-signify, and even *choose*, what «biological facts» can mean, for as Ian Hacking argues biology is not a given, but is shaped by not only scientific knowledge and research, but also by the technology that acts on our bodies and our lives (Hacking 2006).

I would go one step further still. Strike and Libre are communities aggregated around caring for a specific disease, but they also follow in the footsteps of organizations that do research «from the bottom-up» (Rabeharisoa & Callon 2004; Epstein 1996), and that struggle for the recognition of patients and caregivers' rights (Rose 2007). As we've seen, these dimensions are inherently interconnected: relationships are formed through the sharing of care experiences and the imagining (and trying to realize) new care practices. Through this imaginative effort, and their shared and distributed work, both organizations enact different dimensions of the respective diseases (Mol 2002): CP isn't just damage to the brain caused by perinatal stroke, diabetes isn't just the inability of the body to produce insulin; they're both also prisms that redefine proximity and care relationships, and produce both in-group and out-group identity for both patients and caregivers. Per biosociality, biological facts are «modeled on culture understood as practice» – they are outside the body-as-object, and in the body as nexus of cultural and moral meanings. And, also, as nexus of (care) relationships.

Finally, I wish to go back to the issue of responsibility and responsible research. Strike has worked on projects that explicitly refer to the RRI discourse and mobilize its related methodologies, and they have contrasting feelings about them.

> Often it's a «project factory». You get a grant for one, maybe two years, and you do something, and then that's it. It's like with our latest project, with [a university in Northern Italy]. It's not sustainable, we've got a prototype and nothing else. And then they move on. We betrayed the expectations of our community, the families that we involved, and we went against our mission.

One of these projects, Movement, effectively illustrates the contradictions that RRI can fall into from the perspective of end-users (in this case, patients and caregivers). Movement was a project that Strike was involved in, coordinated by engineers and designers of an Italian university. The specific objective of the project was, once again, the prototyping and developing of an aid for motor rehabilitation for children with CP. However, Movement also had a wider objective: to experiment with different methodologies of collaborative innovation, explicitly referring to RRI's principles in the way research, development, and testing were conducted. Strike's founders and community members were involved in identifying which specific need could be addressed; they were involved in prototyping, iterating, and testing possible solutions; they got to try and use the final product of this process. But then, the project was over, and what remained was a few finished prototypes that couldn't be actually used for everyday rehabilitation needs, and mostly couldn't even be accessed outside the confines of the university in question. Even though Movement responded, at least in theory, to the principles and ideals of responsible innovation, in practice it still ended up not answering to the concrete care needs of Strike's community of patients and caregivers.

Symmetry, as we've seen, had similar problems. And this is in general the critique that Federica and Riccardo articulate against RRI as an approach: as long as it remains confined to discrete endeavors, as long as the initiative and resources stay with institutions, no space of research and innovation will be fully «hybrid». The expectation of institutions, in these projects, is usually to find «auxiliary associations» (Rabeharisoa & Callon 2002), that cooperate without necessarily claiming any kind of authority or ownership on the research and its results. The «responsibility» institutions have begins and ends with the involvement (often limited in scope and time) of a section of the community that will be impacted by their work. As we've discussed earlier, this is a structural issue with RRI – but the inherent contradictions of the approach don't mitigate the discontent of patient and caregiver organizations.

This is why Strike tries to reappropriate the idea of responsible research and innovation and redefine it along the lines of a logic of care (Mol 2008). Similarly, in its rejection of institutional responsibility, Libre argues that the community itself is the more legitimate «responsible subject». In both these cases, the constantly renewed process of *attunement* to the needs and perspectives of patients and caregivers is absolutely central to the re-signification of «responsible» and «responsibility». Libre and Strike both try to push at boundaries, make space for people, and take care of them. As Jarrett Zigon argues, attunement is one of the conditions for «being-with»: the ability to remain entangled in relationships, but also the struggle to maintain them, to *care* for each other (Zigon 2014; 2017). Here is where biosociality, responsibility, and attunement intersect: if biosociality is the sharing of not only conditions but experiences, it's a form of acting together – of being-with. The re-signification of biological «facts» is collective, creates the possibility of inhabiting the same world, of being responsible for each other through the act of caring. In the cases of Strike and Libre, being responsible means switching the logic of research and innovation, rather than simply «injecting» cooperation, and through this switch, it means arguing for a different idea of what «good care» can be. In other words, it means creating, and maintaining, a biosocial community.

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Moral and Ethical Dilemmas of Italian Embryo Recipients

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex landscape of assisted reproductive technology (ARTs), particularly focusing the ethical dimensions of embryo donation. The emergence of in vitro fertilization (IVF) and the subsequent proliferation of unused embryos have sparked ethical debates regarding their disposal, including cryopreservation and donation. The paper delves into the ethical concerns raised by embryo donation, exploring the narratives of embryo recipients. This article shows the different ethical representations regarding the ontological status of embryos, while paying attention to the ambivalence related to language, practices and meaning that revolve around embryo adoption and/or donation.

Keywords: Embryo donation, Embryo adoption, Embryo recipients, IVF, Ethics.

Riassunto

Questo articolo esplora il complesso panorama della tecnologia riproduttiva assistita (ARTs), concentrandosi in particolare sulle dimensioni etiche della donazione di embrioni. L'emergere della fecondazione in vitro (IVF) e la conseguente proliferazione di embrioni inutilizzati hanno scatenato dibattiti etici sul loro utilizzo, come nel caso della crioconservazione e la donazione. L'articolo approfondisce le preoccupazioni etiche sollevate dalla donazione di embrioni, esplorando le narrazioni dei riceventi di embrioni. Esso mostra le diverse rappresentazioni etiche relative allo status ontologico degli embrioni, prestando attenzione all'ambivalenza legata al linguaggio, alle pratiche e al significato che ruotano intorno all'adozione e/o alla donazione di embrioni.

Parole chiave: Donazione di embrioni, embrioadozione, riceventi di embrioni, IVF, etica.

Introduction

Throughout history, human societies have endorsed the formation of families in different ways. Various solutions have been proposed for individuals who – for different reasons – struggled to conceive. Adoption was one of the first options (Howell 2006), while effective fertility treatments appeared only at the end of the twentieth century. There have been many advances in assisted reproductive technology (ARTs), from simple fertilization (IUI) to more complex treatments such as in vitro fertilization (IVF) where multiple eggs are collected and fertilized, resulting in several embryos. The issue of the cryopreservation of embryos during an IVF treatment began to emerge in the late 1970s. A single IVF cycle involves the creation of numerous embryos and, generally, a greater number of those than will be used for conception. In the early stage of ARTs, more embryos were transferred into the uterus to increase the probability of embryo attachment. With technological development, by the end of the 1990s the standard practice was to transfer no more than two embryos at a time. Thus, the number of unused embryos has grown, opening space for ethical and moral debates on what to do with the remaining embryos.

Across the world, stored embryos are described as problematic, because a significant proportion of these are labelled as «surplus» for reproductive needs and may remain cryopreserved indefinitely if patients do not take any decision, but also if there are not any specific laws on embryo disposal. At the end of IVF treatment, patients have different disposal options for unused embryos: they may be transferred immediately to other patients' wombs, disposed of, or cryopreserved for later use. These four options are not available everywhere. Some legal frameworks allow all of them – as in Spain – while others guarantee only some, as the Italian context. Two main ethical questions are raised by embryos cryopreserved for later use: what should be done with these embryos? And who should decide what happens with these embryos?

At the European level, there is disagreement regarding cryopreserved embryos' status, as shown by the varied legal definitions used in different countries. Embryo disposal is subject to both the norms determined by local policies and clinics, and the vast variety of personal approaches regarding extra embryos, which may range from Egyptian Muslims who want their embryos destroyed (Ihnorn 2003) to Southern Indians who are openly supportive of donation (Bharadwaj 2005). Embryo donation takes two forms:

donation for research, and donation to others for family-building. Building families through embryo donation was first reported in 1983 (Trounsen *et al.* 1983) and since then has been described as a controversial practice. Donation is an accepted practice in numerous countries (Lyerly *et al.* 2005) but forbidden in others (Calhaz-Jorge *et al.* 2020). On the one hand, embryo donation has been described as a problematic issue; on the other, it has been seen as a solution. Patients with extra embryos may embrace donation as an opportunity for their embryos to be used, helping others who have similar difficult experiences with infertility (de Lacey 2005; 2007b; Lyerly *et al.* 2010), but also clinics need to manage the high number of embryos stored at their facilities. The ethical issues of patients donating embryos, either for research purposes or to other patients for family-building, has been discussed at different levels (2019 Ethics). Moral and ethical dilemmas addressed in the literature are somewhat shaped by the legal and cultural environments in which embryo donation occurs (de Lacey *et al.* 2015). One of the first issues raised is the lack of genetic connection between children and both parents, as denominated in these works (Golombok *et al.* 1995; Golombok *et al.* 2006; Cutas & Smajdor 2017). Other research highlights the complex family structure generated by it, while others stressed the presence of fully genetic «siblings» being raised in other families (Soderstrom-Anttila *et al.* 2001; Goedeke & Payne 2009; Blyth *et al.* 2019), something that differs from when children are born from eggs or sperm donated by one of their parents. Issues arise regarding the potential impact of embryo donation on family dynamics and the understanding of genetic and social kinship. Children born from donated embryos have genetic connections to donors who are not their parents, raising issues of identity and genetic origin (Huele *et al.* 2020; Pennings 2022).

While IVF has been extensively studied by anthropologists, embryo donation remains an understudied phenomenon, the exception being a few publications based on data collected in California examining Christian embryo «adoption» programs that relate to them as frozen souls needing to be saved (Collard & Kashmeri 2009; 2011; Cromer 2023); the structural racialization of donated frozen embryos (Cromer 2019); the French context (Giraud 2014; Mathieu 2017), and the Italian one (Zanini 2013). Despite the increasing need for embryo donation (Huele *et al.* 2020) there is a lack of discussion in the literature regarding this phenomenon.

Although embryo donation isn't as popular as general IVF or single gamete donation, the number of people requesting treatment is rising

(Huele *et al.* 2020). Spain is recognized as one of the fertility hubs of the world, since it has very flexible legislation on IVF, allowing practices denied in other European countries. The latest data show that in 2018 Spain was the largest European provider of donor embryos, with 3,479 donated blastocysts (Sociedad Espanola de Fertilidad 2018). The Spanish law (Aznar-Lucea 2016) allows fertility clinics to obtain authority regarding surplus embryos' disposal in all the cases where clinics have been unable to contact patients for over four years, or when they were not able to renew informed consent previously signed. Donated embryos come from a disparate pool: in some cases, they are directly donated by patients, in other cases they are labeled as «abandoned embryos» and managed by fertility centers. These embryos include those created with patients' gametes, and those from egg and sperm donors. According to data released by the International Committee for Monitoring Assisted Reproductive Technologies, patients come mainly from Italy, France, and Germany. Since 2014, foreigner clinics, especially Spanish facilities, opened branches in Italy. Generally, the first visits were made in Italy, but all the other treatments specifically banned in Italy (such as embryo transfer of donated embryos) occur in Spain. This has made embryo donation between Italy and Spain particularly effective, nourishing fertility chains (Vertommen, Pavone & Nahman 2022) linking couples in Italy, Spain, and beyond. In this article, I analyze the embryo donation narratives of Italians who became parents using donated embryos from Spain. I focused my attention on Italian embryo recipients, most of whom traveled to Spain for embryo donation. Law Feb. 19February 2004, No. 40 – Regulations on medically assisted reproduction – (here referred as Law 40) is one of the most restrictive in the European Union (Zanini 2013), allowing access only to straight couples with proven infertility with the option of using exclusively their own gametes. In 2014, after several interventions by the Constitutional Court, Law 40 underwent some important changes, including the introduction of gamete donation. While this change allowed the creation of embryos using both sperm and egg donors – so-called double donation – no specific directions were given about embryo donation. Cryopreserved blastocysts can be exclusively used either by the couple who created them or stored in fertility clinics in perpetuity. Due to the various legal prohibitions and the long waiting lists for fertility care, an increasing number of Italians travel abroad. The article examines the diverse ethical interpretations regarding the ontological status of embryos and explores the complexities and ambiguities surrounding the language, practices, and meanings linked to embryo donation.

The representation and status of embryos in Italy and beyond

The ontological status of embryos lies at the heart of numerous debates in various European and North American nations, and in other parts of the world. It is important to mention that ethical standards established by the law differ from those held by the public. Indeed, the way in which legislation distinguishes between ethical and unethical behavior does not always reflect the views of the public. In an ethnography conducted in an Ecuadorian fertility lab by Elisabeth Roberts (2007), two distinct logics arose when discussing relinquishing embryos. One aligns with what Roberts defines as «life ethics» (181), viewing embryos as interchangeable living entities, while the other aligns with what she calls «kin ethics» (*Ibidem*), conceptualizing embryos as part of a specific kinship web. According to Roberts, kin ethics leads some Ecuadorians to discard embryos rather than cryopreserve or donate them, as they perceive embryos as relatives in need of protection from temporal disruption and unauthorized circulation beyond familial boundaries, rather than simply life to be preserved. In this framework, kin ethics prevails over other types of conceptualizations related to embryos. This shows that embryos are represented as individuals, in line with some other dominant depictions of embryos. The Italian anthropologist Claudia Mattalucci theorized the concept of embryiopoiesis, a human construct that defines methods of depicting life before birth, regardless of cultural, institutional, and legislative differences between states (Mattalucci 2015) According to Mattalucci, the predominant feature of embryopoiesis in Western societies is the representation of embryonic development as a «unitary process» in a standalone form, where the relational condition is underestimated in favor of biology. In other words, the biological dimension is often described as a separate process and the role of other necessary factors – i.e., a uterus – is not highlighted. In this paper, I show how, with embryo donation, the relational dimension (Giraud 2014; 2015) is at the core of embryo recipients' narratives.

Local representations of how the category of person is described also influence the ways in which life before birth is imagined (Strathern 1992). It has been shown in literature how powerful an impact ultrasound monitoring has on strengthening mother-fetus attachment before delivery (Duden

1994 [1991]). Pregnant women were able to see the fetus in the womb, entering into a very particular relationship with it. Different forms of pregnancy monitoring (ultrasound, heartbeat readings, genetic testing) allow mothers to begin a relationship in early gestation (Georges 1997; Rapp 1999). The ability to observe the fetus in the womb made it a public entity (Duden 1994 [1991]). Being able to see inside women's bodies also changed the relationship between mother and fetus: it made visible each stage of the nine-month relationship, highlighting the presence of two separate and specific individuals. The medicalization of pregnancy on the one hand and the development of reproductive technologies on the other have fueled the representation of distinct identities for fetuses and pregnant women. Embryos and fetuses are conceptualized as individuals, meaning they are seen as possessing specific traits that make them distinct, encoded in their DNA (Mattalucci 2015). This tendency is particularly noticeable in the way cultural perceptions and depictions of embryos are formed.

In 1996, the Italian National Bioethics Committee published a document entitled «Identity and Status of the Human Embryo», which states:

> The Committee has unanimously come to recognize the moral duty to treat the human embryo, from fertilization, in accordance with the criteria of respect and protection that must be adopted with respect to human individuals to whom the characteristic of personhood is commonly attributed, and this regardless of whether the embryo is attributed the characteristic of personhood with certainty from the outset... or whether one prefers not to use the technical concept of person and to refer only to that membership in the human species which cannot be contested in the embryo from its earliest moments and does not undergo alteration during its subsequent development.

The text calls for human embryo protection as the «subject» of the reproductive process. This concept was subsequently reaffirmed in 2004, when Law 40 passed, introducing *concepito* (conceived being), a concept previously absent from Italian legal practice (Zanini 2013). Another significant change was prohibiting cryopreservation, a practice commonly carried out by Italian fertility clinics prior to the introduction of Law 40 to avoid the storage of human embryos inside liquid nitrogen tanks and to preserve their dignity. Between 2004 and 2009, in Italy it was legal to create a maximum of three embryos and all of them (regardless of grade and quality) had to be transferred into patients' uteruses (Benagiano & Gianaroli 2010). Another important change was the repeal of certain provisions in 2014, followed by amendments and updates in 2019.[1] These changes mainly concerned limitations and regulations regarding IVF techniques and practices of gamete and embryo donation. Additionally, there have been variations regarding the number of embryos to be transferred and embryo preservation procedures. Legislative change has often reflected ongoing ethical and scientific debates on assisted reproduction, seeking to balance the protection of patients' health and rights with moral and societal considerations (Mattalucci 2013).

The dominant players in Italian politics (Hanafin 2007) around this issue are the Catholic Church and pro-life activists (Mattalucci 2015), who unanimously support the moral duty to protect the dignity and the right to life of embryos. In 2022, Pope Francis, through the Pope's World Prayer Network on the theme «For a Christian Response to the Challenges of Bioethics», said

> Biotechnological applications must always be used from the standpoint of respect for human dignity. For example, human embryos cannot be treated as disposable, waste material; in this culture of waste, they also enter: no, it is not possible! Thus, spreading this culture does so much damage. Neither can we allow economic profit to condition biomedical research[2].

The most significant points advocated by the Pope on the subject are, firstly, respect for human dignity. Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of using biotechnological applications while upholding human dignity. This includes refusing to treat human embryos as disposable objects and opposing any practices that violate that intrinsic dignity. The second point relates to ethical practices for biomedical research. The Pope warns against the conditioning of biomedical research by economic profit. He argues that the goal of biomedical research should be the well-being and health of individuals, not financial gain. The pontiff's remarks highlight the Catholic Church' position regarding the ontological status of the embryo, in addition to the way it deals with scientific advances in reproductive

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[1] A series of Constitutional Court rulings have declared parts of the law unconstitutional, introducing, for example, heterologous fertilization instead of homologous fertilization. For in-depth analysis, *cf.* Ferrero, Pulice 2021.

[2] Translated by the Author. https://stream24.ilsole24ore.com/video/italia/papa-embrioni-umani-non-siano-usati-come-materiale-usa-e-getta/AENBGnIB?refresh_ce=1

medicine. This is crucial when discussing the influence of certain Catholic associations on Italian politics, especially when discussions touch upon bioethical issues such as reproductive politics. Despite continuing ambivalence concerning the status of embryos, the dominant representation of embryos is as individuals who need protection.

Embryos' ambivalence

A common thread in existing scholarship centers on embryos' ambivalence, since embryos are represented differently in different cultures (Franklin 2006; Roberts 2007; Zanini 2013). Moreover, even in the same society, in relation to the social actors involved – such as donors and recipients, fertility doctors, embryologists, third-party coordinators and so on – embryos' representation may differ drastically. All these depend on the context, as well as on the characteristics of the embryo or fetus, the timing (Giraud 2015), and the relationships in which they are involved.

The ethical and moral standing of embryos has been central to the discussion surrounding research that involves human embryonic stem cells (Haimes & Taylor 2009). Authorities like the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (2006) and the Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority in the UK (Recommendations for gamete and embryo donation: a committee opinion, 2012) have expressed the view that although embryos have the potential to develop into persons, they should not be granted the same legal status as a person. Although these and other scientific societies have produced knowledge highlighting embryos' specificities, the language used to refer to the practice under analysis often reflects an existing ambiguity. There are predominantly two terms, often used as synonyms. On the one hand, there is «embryo adoption», and on the other «embryo donation». This terminology is not neutral. Embryo adoption is described as a «morally preferable alternative», framing it as a salvific action (Cromer 2018). In this framing, embryos are human and alive (de Lacey 2005; 2007a; Frith *et al.* 2011; Nachtigall *et al.* 2005; O'Brien 2010; Söderström-Anttila *et al.* 2001). Ethnographic examples that highlight this trend have been conducted in the USA, where embryos are considered «preborn children» (Collard & Kashmeri 2011), and as frozen souls to be saved (Cromer 2023), but also in European countries such as France (Giraud 2014; 2015; Mathieu 2017). By employing the term «adoption» in this context, embryos are treated as legally recognized subjects, akin to adopting children after birth. Embryo donation, by contrast, focuses on an understanding of the embryo that does not portray it as «already life» and embraces a variety of different meanings. In 2023, the American Society for Reproductive Medicine shared a document to discourage the using of «adoption» to refer to every embryo donation practice:

> The use of the term «adoption» in this context is misleading because it reinforces a conceptualization and status of the embryo as a fully entitled legal being and may lead to a series of legal procedures required for the adoption of born children that are not appropriate and that would unjustly burden both donors and recipients, as well as restrict medical practices, based on the embryo's legal status (2023: 944).

This highlights the problematic use of the term «adoption» in reference to donated embryos. This linguistic choice is described as inappropriate since it creates a conceptual association between the embryo and a fully entitled legal entity, which does not reflect the biological reality. Additionally, applying legal concepts related to the adoption of children to situations involving embryos could lead to confusion and entail legal proceedings unsuitable to the context of assisted reproduction. Therefore, according to Ethics Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, it is important to use precise and appropriate language that accurately reflects the nature of embryos and related ethical and legal issues.

Fieldwork and methodology

I began conducting research in 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic introduced a few challenges on human interactions that had a direct impact on ethnographic studies. From a methodological point of view, several limitations were imposed on the typical research practices used by anthropologists, mainly due to restrictions on mobility, the imposition of physical distancing, and the need to protect the health of the population. Such restrictions, initially perceived by many researchers as making it impossible to conduct research, have been read by other scholars as epistemological opportunities to reflect on the ways of conducting ethnographies in the contemporary world (Decataldo & Russo 2022).

As mentioned above, even though Spain is a hub for fertility treatments as embryo donation, I didn't want to geographically frame my fieldwork exclusively within Italy and Spain, since previous studies on reproduction have already highlighted the transnational dimension of IVF. IVF journeys are often realized after having collected information through digital communities in which prospective parents learn how to navigate fertility treatments within networks of transnational circulation (Smietana 2019; Guerzoni 2020). Virtual communities are important spaces for grasping IVF experiences, since they are built around the meanings of reproduction and can become key places for accessing the field and understanding its intertwined meanings (Berend 2016). I identified some communities, fora, websites and Facebook and WhatsApp groups. I thus selected different online fora dedicated to fertility, reproduction and IVF, within which there were threads devoted to embryo donation. I subsequently ascertained the absence of Italian Facebook groups exclusively dedicated to individuals who used this practice. The lack of specific groups does not indicate the complete absence of digital communities, but it certainly highlights the peculiarity of the phenomenon that, unlike other practices such as egg or sperm donation, remains less visible. In addition to fora and digital groups, I searched the web for fertility clinics, mainly Spanish, but also those with offices in Italy, that offered embryo donation. I sent a flyer introducing the project to these clinics so that it could be spread within their networks. Communication with research participants was both synchronous, as it developed through video calls or online meetings (as in the case of the semi-structured interviews), and asynchronous through an exchange of instant messages and e-mail (such as the interwoven conversations on relevant topics between researcher and participants).

My research (2020-2023) has involved fourteen Italian couples (three straight couples, eleven lesbian couples), and five single people (three straight and two lesbians). Two straight couples used a clinic in the Czech Republic, while the others used Spanish clinics, or a Spanish branch opened in Italy. In addition, from 2020 to 2022, I followed some fora that had threads dedicated to embryo donation.

Embryo adoption and embryo donation from recipients' point of view

My interviewees chose embryo donation after numerous attempts at assisted reproduction in various states. None of them were aware of embryo donation when they began their fertility journey. It was not their initial choice; rather, fertility specialists recommended it after multiple unsuccessful IVF cycles. It has been explained to embryo recipients that these embryos were donated by people who decide to give a gift freely to someone else. My data shown that not much is known about donated embryos, and therefore, it is not possible to know how the donors conceptualized the ethics of life (Roberts 2007). As embryo donation is anonymous in Spain, not much information was shared about these embryos beyond grading. There were no specifics on either donor, such as age or whether the embryos were created with the couple's own gametes, or whether they were contributed by one or two donors and then subsequently donated. Matches are made by clinics that select embryos mainly by phenotypic and blood group similarity.

Having discussed the terminology suggested by some of the most influential scientific societies to refer to embryo donation, in this section, I show the language used by fertility institutions and embryos recipients. I analyzed five Spanish fertility websites and in the shared information the main category was «adoption», even though ethics committees and reproductive medicine experts have emphasized that this term is inappropriate. Below is an example of text from one of the five websites:

> To *adopt* means to take care of a *human being* whose *biological parents* were unable to [do so]. Transfers of adopted embryos are very special. The wish of conceiving a child and the idea of leaving behind the treatments – or not having contemplated them for moral reasons – comes together. They are the nicest transfers as there is happiness in the air. From each child born, we could write a book about love, dedication, and *gratitude to life* [italics added].

In these narratives, an embryo is portrayed as the offspring of a couple that conceived it but who were unable to take care of it. This reinforces the perception of embryos as pre-existing children, and the crucial power of genetics as an important factor to structure kinship ties. These representations resonate with the moral compass of individuals who feel compelled to take responsibility for these «human beings». This clearly shows the salvific action of and motivation behind embryo donation. All the material shared by these five clinics highlighted embryo «adoption» as a dedicated practice to save lives, stressing the salvific and moral action of intended parents. Although the term «embryo adoption» was dominant in the sites of the clinics analyzed, it seems to be used differently during consultations with patients, according to data collected with Italian embryo recipients. Indeed, during the fieldwork, the two main expressions had distinct meanings, according to my interlocutors. The term «embryo adoption» was mainly used by those who used a Spanish clinic and opted to receive a stored cryopreserved embryos remaining from previous IVF cycles: that is, «leftover embryos», created for patients both using their genetic materials or donors' gametes. In addition, the term «embryo donation» was mainly used by those who used a Czech fertility clinic, denoting embryos created using two gamete donors, known as double donation. In summary, embryo *adoption* refers to the utilization of already cryopreserved embryos, while embryo *donation* involves the use of specifically created embryos. Despite this important difference, respondents often used «adoption» and «donation» as synonyms, regardless of each their personal representation of human embryos. As one of embryo recipients wrote in a thread, «What changes is the origin of the frozen embryos. There are those who use available embryos and those who make them tailored» (Anonymous #3, forum B, 2018). The absence of a genetic connection between embryos and recipients is highlighted, which is common to both practices. The fora generated other relevant representations:

> Embryo donation is nothing more than a donation of two gametes. It is like the heterologous fertilization. However, it is an embryo donation, but it is also an embryo adoption because there is an embryo transferred into the uterus, so technically you adopt an embryo that is not genetically yours.

Embryo donation is compared to heterologous fertilization, emphasizing that it is, after all, the donation of two gametes. There is not a technical distinction between the term «embryo donation» and «embryo adoption» and the writer points out that, although this is technically referred to as donation, it can also be considered adoption because the embryo is transferred into the uterus of a woman who is not the genetic mother. Significantly, despite the use of the word «adoption», mostly on Spanish clinics' websites and fora, informants had a heterogeneous representation of what an embryo was. The ontological status of the embryo varied between being considered «human life» and being seen as «a bunch of cells», showing that the use of the word «adoption» instead of «donation» is not directly linked to how people understand embryos.

Salvific and moral action narratives

As mentioned, most interviewees opted for cryopreserved embryos from a Spanish clinic («embryo adoption»). This solution was chosen for a combination of reasons. The first relates to the high success rates of this practice described by fertility specialists on clinics' websites. Many interviewees expressed that these success rates renewed their hope of becoming parents after many failures. Cinzia and her wife met when they were in their late forties. They began fertility procedures as soon as they could: they each had two egg retrievals, which were unsuccessful. Their gynecologist shared success rates for their age, by which the couple felt extremely discouraged. Cinzia said,

> When the doctor told us that with embryo donation, we may have a 57% chance to achieve a pregnancy…it sounded like a miracle for us! We were used to hearing 5%, 2%...with an adoption of a blasto, we could have a 57% [chance]. Let's do it!

The second reason is related to cost (Hill & Freeman 2011: 942). Embryo adoption was «an affordable practice», one interlocutor said. Zanini's findings show that embryo donation was one of the most financially achievable options for some couples (2013).

All the interviewees involved in the research opted for embryo donation after several attempts at assisted reproduction in different states. None of them knew about embryo donation before starting their fertility journey. Embryo donation was not patients' first choice. Instead, in most cases, it was suggested by fertility specialists after many IVF failures. This is in line with previous data; many clinics suggest double donation as a «tailored fertility journey», highlighting that the potential children born through this donation may have not have any fully genetic siblings, as in the case of donated embryos. Specialists only discussed about embryo donation when specifically asked or when the patients' financial means became depleted (Gross & Mehl 2018).

Simona, a 43-year-old secretary, wanted to create a family with her wife Giulia, a 48-year-old housewife. When Giulia was 44, she was already experiencing some symptoms of early menopause. Simona started her fertility journey when she was 39. She underwent different procedures, from IUI to IVF. Simona told me that she was ready to give up as she felt emotionally, physically, but especially financially drained:

> After few months from the last IVF cycle, the gynecologist called me and said: «Look, I have embryos [for which] you would pay less. I am sorry to say that, but that's the way it is. Why don't you come and let's try that?». I didn't know it was possible to use already embryos stored at the clinic!

After the call, Simone searched the internet, trying to learn more about embryo donation. For many Italians who go through IVF, the internet is a precious tool to collect information. Simona easily found several fora dedicated to embryo donation and read stories shared by others, such as «I only discovered a couple of months ago that the embryo of adoption exists… and since that day I can't stop thinking about it!» (Anonymous #4, forum B, 2019).

Combining the data from interviews with the analyzed threads on the fora, embryo donation was described as a discovery and as a life-saving procedure, but also as the last option. My research showed that patients always start with their own genetic material, using different techniques and making several different attempts; only later, following failures, do they opt for this solution. Interviewees described it as the «last chance», the «last try» of their parenthood project because, as Giulia, Simona's wife, testified,

> There wasn't anything left to lose […] We hadn't any chance left. The gynecologist informed us about this procedure when we already stopped dreaming about having a child. As soon as we learned about it, we felt hope, and we wanted to give a shot to embryo adoption.

In a similar way, some narratives collected on the fora stressed the hope brought back by the discovery of embryo donation. Anonymous #5 wrote:

> Embryo adoption has been like an unexpected gift for us. We didn't know about it. But even if I knew it, I would not have chosen it as the first option because I wanted to use my egg first. And then, at least, my husband's sperm. Only after so many cycles, we unwrapped this gift and opted for adopting an embryo. (Forum C, 2019)

One interesting aspect found in many interviews was related to how embryos were described by specialists from different clinics as limited resources and patients as blessed people receiving these embryos. According to my interviewees, fertility specialists represented extra embryos as extremely hard to be find. Below is an ethnographic example:

> We've been lucky, they found the perfect embryo for us, compatible with us. The doctor told us that's not easy to find embryos ready to be matched with our characteristics.

According to my participants, specialists tend to match embryos with recipients based on shared similarities. As with egg and sperm donation, embryo donation in Spain is anonymous. So, as the interviews revealed, patients do not know anything about these embryos, sometimes not even the age of the donors or the blood type. What it is mostly shared with them is the terrific effort made to find «compatible» donors. From the interviews, the concept of compatibility covers a wide range of possibilities, from phenotypic characteristics to blood type. In many interviews, the concept of luck emerged: finding «the right» embryo at the right time. As Fiorenza said,

> The doctor told us: «You are very lucky. This is a lucky coincidence, there are the right embryos for you, at the right time» and we felt that we were lucky.

Cryopreserved embryos are often represented as crystallized in time, waiting to receive the chance to develop in recipients' uteruses. Similarly, in a mirror-effect, recipients' parenthood was described as waiting to obtain the right embryo and thus definitively begin the journey. The embryos were on hold, as was recipients' parenthood.

> I am not adopting a leftover of someone else. It is a terrible thought. I am adopting a new life. It is a choice that we make, and it was coming from the bottom of our heart. It is a chance for us but also for this little one. I see it as an adoption, I am adopting a really tiny human. (Anonymous #2, forum A, 2017)

My findings also show some other interesting meanings connected to choosing embryo donation related to ethics, as described by many interviewees. One of these related to genetic choices described as an ethical choice. Anna highlighted that she opted for embryo donation instead of using a gamete donor. Anna and her husband Enzo tried to conceive for several years. They went to an IVF clinic and, as is common, began with tests on Anna's reproductive systems. Through an AMH analysis, they discovered that she had a good ovarian reserve. Having learned about Anna's fertility, the gynecologist required a semen sample for analysis from Enzo. The results showed azoospermia, or as the doctor told them, «no sperm count». Their clinician suggested an IVF cycle to retrieve some spermatozoa directly from his testicles using a needle. Unfortunately, these attempts failed, and the next solution proposed was using a sperm donor. Anna explained why they didn't want to use someone else's sperm, preferring an existing embryo instead:

> My husband had semen problems. They informed us that we needed a sperm donor. But I did not want that, I wanted a child from him and not from another man. So, I didn't want to use my eggs either. At that point we were

> focusing on double donation, and at that moment, they proposed [to] us [that we could] adopt two embryos. Or both genes or nothing.

For Anna and Enzo, it was much more important to be involved equally, from a genetic point of view. They didn't care how the embryos were created (if they were already cryopreserved somewhere or if they needed to create them). What they were looking for an equal level of genetic involvement. Anna stressed that was a matter of being fairly and equally involved.

I also found other choices seen through an ethical prism. Embryo donation has been presented by recipients as a more ethical accepted practice compared to other fertility options, such as sperm and egg donation. Katia in her forties, and Elisa in her fifties, decided to have kids together. Katia, when she was a teenager, had leukemia and the chemotherapy treatments had an impact on her fertility: she completely lost any ovarian reserve. Elisa was already experiencing some pre-menopause symptoms when they decided to see a fertility specialist. Neither of them had oocytes that could be used to create embryos, but both had perfectly healthy uteruses to carry a pregnancy, as their clinician told them. Their gynecologist told them that he was going to find an egg donor esthetically like both of them, but the couple immediately refused because it implied using a gamete donor. Elisa and Katia were more interested in embryo donation because, as they mentioned, cryopreserved embryos represent the outcome of a project of love and intention from another couple, and they felt more comfortable selecting one of these embryos rather than asking to a young egg donor to undergo egg retrieval.

> In most cases these embryos are leftover embryos. Embryos who are donated from an infertile couple. Using an egg donor was something that we didn't want. Knowing that those embryos were a fruit of a project, a fruit of love and mostly a gift…it was the best option for us, ethically speaking.

In some cases, using existing embryos has been described as a more ethically sustainable option than starting new treatments involving new gamete donors, for two reasons. The first concerns the use of existing embryos to avoid the ad hoc creation of new embryos. A rhetorical question asked by an interviewee was why create new embryos – genetically disconnected to us – if they already exist cryopreserved? An extra embryo carries a backstory, having been involved in another couple's journey towards parenthood and, as described by recipients, left behind by the donating couple. The second aspect concerns egg donors' possible exploitation, which they may have heard about on in the media or on social platforms. In some interviews, such as the one above, mention was made of procedures related to egg donation. To avoid nurturing certain fertility chains, some recipients opted for embryo donation because there was no need to have a donor undergo unnecessary treatment.

While embryo donation has been described as an ethical choice for some, others have nevertheless pointed out the lack of ethics principles applied by some Spanish clinics. Interestingly, the unethicality of certain practices did not emerge from the interviews but was highlighted by anonymous users of analyzed fertility for, as we can read in the example reported below:

> In my opinion, Spain' policy is not ethical; they are charging us so much money for leftover embryos. It is too much compared to their value. They are rejected embryos from other couples. (Anonymous #1, forum A, 2018)

Using already cryopreserved embryos raised broader societal questions about the commodification of human life and the inequalities in access to reproductive technologies. As opposed to eggs and sperm that, in some states, have value according to specific traits (such as researched genetic qualities, phenotypic characteristics etc.)[3] embryos as «potential human life» cannot be transacted. In other words, within the reproductive market, compared to gametes, embryos don't have an intrinsic economic value that depends and/or varies on the qualities possessed. Around 2012, a company in California started producing and selling embryos, raising numerous concerns (Zarembo 2012; Klitzman & Sauer 2015). Some concerns arose about the commercialization of embryos, the intrinsic value related to desirable qualities of particular biovalues (Waldby 2008)[4] and the exacerbation of existing disparities in access to fertility treatments. Following heated debates, in 2021 the American Society for Reproductive Medicine

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[3] The literature shows that donor egg agencies and fertility clinics pay more for eggs from women with perceived desirable traits, such as those with higher SAT scores, and a track record of successful past donations (Levine 2010). For example, in the US, Almeling (2007) notes that reproductive cells are predominantly utilized as vehicles for buying and selling ideals related to middle-class American femininity and masculinity, as well as concepts of motherhood and fatherhood.

[4] Waldby introduced the concept of «biovalue» to refer to the production of a surplus of biological vitality obtained through the biotechnical reconfiguration of living processes.

(ASRM) published *Guidance Regarding Gamete and Embryo Donation*. In this document, it is stated that

> The practice may charge potential recipients a professional fee for embryo thawing, [the] embryo transfer procedure, cycle coordination and documentation, and infectious disease screening and testing of both recipients and donors. However, the *selling of embryos per se is ethically unacceptable*. (1399) [italics added].

The text highlights two key issues concerning costs associated with this practice that recall what was argued by Pope Francis in 2022. The most crucial issue is the complete opposition to embryos' commercialization, followed by a growing inquiry into the suitability of fees that providers and agencies ought to apply for embryos. From the patients' point of view, the charges imposed by clinics are not always clear. In most cases, my interlocutors said «we bought two embryos» or «I paid for one blasto» having understood that what they paid also included a «price» for the «adopted» embryos. This explains statements like that of anonymous #1, who describes extra embryos as «too expensive».

Final remarks

This study examined the experiences of Italians who received donated embryos. My research showed that patients always start with their own genetic material, using different techniques and making several different attempts; only later, following failures, do they opt for this solution. Indeed, my interlocutors opted for embryo donation after multiple unsuccessful attempts at assisted reproduction across different countries. Initially, none of them were aware of this option, as it was only recommended to them by fertility specialists after several failed IVF cycles. They were informed that these embryos were donated by individuals who wanted to offer a gift to others. Since embryo donation is anonymous in Spain, making it unclear whether the donors were in fact motivated by life ethics (Roberts 2007). Some interlocutors received info on embryo grading, but without details about embryo donors' profiles, such as age or how embryos were created, if using the couple's own gametes, a single donor, or a combination of two donors. Clinics match embryos to recipients primarily based on phenotypic and blood group compatibility.

Several ethical issues are intertwined within embryo donation practices. Firstly, one of the primary ethical considerations revolves around embryos' status. As shown, the ontological status of embryos is at the center of political, cultural, legal and ethical controversies around whether embryos have the moral standing of human beings from the moment of conception, deserving of the same rights and protections as born individuals. Here, embryo donation raises questions about the sanctity of human life and whether it is ethically permissible to donate or use embryos for reproductive purposes. The ambivalence of embryos' status is reflected in the language used. The terminological landscape surrounding embryos' disposal is not merely a matter of semantics but holds deep implications for ethical and societal perceptions at large. Spanish fertility clinics prominently use the term «adoption» to describe embryo donation, despite what has been suggested by ethics committees and reproductive medicine experts. But as shows, recipients often use adoption and donation as synonymous even if – from their point of view – they are referring to distinct practices. In this way, I have shown how an embryo is represented (whether «already life» or «a bunch of cells») does not directly impact recipients' choices on how they define donation or adoption. Using the term «embryo adoption» refers to already created embryos, but this does not mean that these prospective parents see embryos as individuals.

Embryo adoption has been described as an ethical choice not because they were saving souls – as has been found in the US (Cromer 2018; 2023) – but predominantly for two other reasons (intricately interconnected) that have been described as morally positive. The central issue is the absence of a genetic connection between embryos and recipients. Creating ad hoc embryos when there are already cryopreserved ones has been described as a waste of resources and possibilities; more importantly, it is seen as an unnecessary practice that would have required collecting eggs from other women. Although there was no specific information on embryos' donors, donated embryos were described as the result of a project of love and this aspect was highlighted as particularly relevant. The saving narrative was used not so much to describe the act of «rescuing» embryos (*Ibidem*) but was related to the restored hope in embryo recipients, feeling that perhaps they were more likely to become parents via this practice. Cryopreserved embryos were described as frozen in time, waiting for an opportunity to be transferred into a recipient's uterus. Expectation is a key concept used by recipients to describe their condition: just as embryos were waiting, their parenting project was, too, highlighting the relational dimension of embryos. The embryos' donation narratives discussed here erode the dominance of embryopoiesis, by showing how embryonic development is a not a simple unitary process that can develop in a standalone form, detached from everything. Rather, it is intricately dependent upon a web of elements such as failures, hopes, bodies and stories in order to develop, or not.

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The Diffuse Person: the Moral Worlds of Organ Transplantation

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Abstract

In addition to the issue of the coherence of the Maussian model of gift practices in the context of the body donation, further crucial questions for anthropology sharply emerge. What symbolic role does the harvested and donated body part play? What kind of relational effects does it produce, circulating in the social body? Which discourses surround this experience? What kind of practices do they produce? In this article, on the basis of two ethnographic fieldworks on organ donation carried out in recent years (2018-2022), I intend to address this question by showing how we can interrogate not only the practice of donation but a multiplicity of notions involved in it. The aim will therefore be to show how, according to the social actors concerned with the organ donation, at least two notions of person – the Cartesian person and the diffuse person – operate. Depending on which notion the social actors refer to, different constructions of the world are revealed, different local knowledge is produced, and, above all, a different set of ethical practices is constructed, which we can reinterpret and understand from the perspective of care relationships.

Keywords: organ donation; medical anthropology; care relationships; personhood; moral anthropology.

La persona diffusa, ovvero i mondi morali del trapianto di organi

Al di là della domanda sulla coerenza del modello maussiano delle pratiche di dono nel contesto del dono del corpo, altre questioni centrali per l'antropologia emergono con forza. Quale ruolo simbolico riveste la parte di corpo prelevata e donata? Che tipo di effetti relazionali produce, circolando nel corpo sociale? Quali campi di discorso avvolgono questa esperienza? Che tipo di pratiche producono? In questo articolo, a partire da due lavori etnografici sulla donazione degli organi svolti negli ultimi anni (2018-2022), intendo affrontare la questione mostrando come si possa interrogare non solo la pratica della donazione ma una molteplicità di nozioni in essa coinvolte. Si tratterà quindi di mostrare come, a seconda degli attori sociali interessati dalla donazione degli organi, operino almeno due nozioni di persona – la persona cartesiana e la persona diffusa. A seconda di quale sia la nozione cui gli attori sociali fanno riferimento, si mostrano al nostro sguardo costruzioni del mondo diverse, si producono saperi locali differenti e, soprattutto, si costruisce un diverso panorama di pratiche etiche, che noi possiamo rileggere e comprendere secondo la prospettiva delle relazioni di care.

Parole chiave: donazione degli organi; antropologia medica; relazioni di *care*; persona; antropologia della morale.

Introduction

The domain of organ donation, and body donation more generally, has been approached in anthropological and sociological terms from a two-fold perspective. On the one hand, the relevance of the general model of gift practices conceptualised by Mauss has been discussed in relation to these new contemporary social institutions, which are considered «forms of the gift» by the actors who are involved in it[1]; on the other hand, several social scientists have tried to reinterpret it in moral terms. Essentially, the classic

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[1] This model proposed by Marcel Mauss is a threefold one – giving, receiving, and reciprocating – which takes place between two subjects who are in a close relationship with each other and who foster their relationship through the practice of giving. In contrast, legislation on post-mortem organ donation prevents any contact between the donor's family and the recipient. This element of anonymity has long been the subject of anthropological debate, appearing as a factor that prevents any overlap between Mauss's model of the gift and so-called body donation: see, among others, Steiner 2010; 2012; Quéré 2010; Scheper-Hughes 2007; Lock 2001; Fox & Swazey 1978. I have recently attempted to address and solve this problem by drawing on some of Marcel Mauss's lesser-known reflections than the *Essay on the Gift* and offering an emic interpretation of the institution of body donation; cf. Mauss 1931; Quarta 2023. However, it is not the aim of this paper to pursue this debate and, in this context, I simply refer the reader to the bibliographical references in this footnote.

works by Titmuss (1970) on blood donation and by Fox and Swazey (1978; 1992) on organ donation can be fully included in the tradition of studies that have sought, more or less implicitly, to reconceptualise the gift of the body within the framework of moral practices. The same can be said of more recent studies, such as those by Jensen (2016; Hoyer & Jensen 2011) and Heinemann (2014; 2015) which aim to shed light on the elements that permeate and construct the experience of the donation of the Self, such as hope in the former case and caring relationships in the latter.

The purpose of this article is to provide a further understanding of the phenomenon by exploring the moral dimension of organ donation through an examination of the ethical stances of care. I propose to show how that there are at least two different models for social actors faced with the consent or rejection of organ donation to deal with this issue. These models depend on the sets of representations through which subjects relate to the concept of person. What I mean by person is the patchwork of histories, relationships, and affects that come together in an active self-consciousness that, phenomenologically, we call the Self. Analytically, then, I will use «person» as a synonym for the notion of *presence* introduced by the Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino (1988; 2023).

Thus, the first model, based on the notion of the «Cartesian person», is essentially biomedical, or at least inherited from biomedicine, and establishes an indissoluble relationship between what we consider to be the «human person» and the threshold between life and death. Once the frontier of life is crossed, the relationship between cognitive activity and the integrity of the body dissolves, and with it the person disappears. The second model, on the other hand, which is based on the notion of the «diffuse person», emerges from the analysis of the motivations and experiences of some of the social actors involved in the context of donation and constructs the possibility of thinking about the presence of the person beyond the threshold of death[2].

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[2] I postulate that there is a third model, also grounded in the notion of the «diffuse person», which helps us to understand the reason for some forms of opposition to donation, mainly linked to the desire not to «dismember» or «butcher» the body (Waissman 1996; 2001), because of the representation of a person who survives biological death in the body. However, as I do not have any ethnographic material on the opposition dimension and can only refer to secondary sources, I prefer not to develop this argument, which would have a merely conjectural value.

Drawing on the concept of local moral worlds, introduced in particular by Arthur Kleinman (1999; Keinman & Van der Geest 2009), I will show that there is an intimate relationship between ontology, morality, and epistemology. If the set of representations to which I have just referred gives rise to an articulated series of statements about what a «person» is and, secondly, about what kind of events can lead to the end of the «person», it is precisely on the basis of this ontological structuring that subjects develop a spectrum of moral values, on the one hand, and of possible ethical choices, on the other. And vice versa.

Some conceptual and methodological clarifications need to be provided as a preliminary step.

First of all, despite the wide-ranging debate that has recently developed in the anthropological sphere around the themes of ethics and morality[3], it is useful to provide a clear framework for how I make use of these two concepts, which in turn refer to historically layered fields of Western philosophical reflection, as well as to the common use of social actors. In referring to morality, I am talking about a *corpus of* meta-practical, culturally situated values and assertions that offer social actors points of reference to guide their action. This *corpus* encompasses the range of socio-cultural precepts that distinguish the good from the bad, the just from the unjust, the legitimate from the illegitimate, etc. I see ethics as synonymous with morally informed praxis: that is, the vast field that includes the practices of subjects, reconceptualised according to their moral dimensions. In this sense, giving, caring, and educating, as well as stealing, killing, and in-

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[3] Since at least the beginning of the 21st century, anthropologists have turned their attention to the domain of ethics and morality, producing a number of often discordant interpretative models of what we consider «moral» and what we consider «ethical». Recently, Csordas (2013) has grouped these different approaches into four clusters. The first, mainly related to the work of Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman on trauma, is presented as an attempt to rethink morality and moral action as specific fields of the social (Fassin & Rechtman 2007). The second reflects on the socially instituted ways in which morality acquires practical value through ethical attitudes (Robbins 2004; Zigon 2008). The third responds to the concept of «local moral worlds», i.e. spaces of meaning within which moral constructions allow subjects to project themselves onto a meaningful horizon and thereby find resources to relate to their suffering (Kleinman 1992; 2006; Parish 1991; 2014). The fourth one aims to grasp the agentive dimension of the subject as an autopoietic form implemented through systems of practices that constitute the specific ethicality of ordinary human life (Faubion 2001; Laidlaw 2013; Lambek 2015; Das 2006; 2020). For an analytical and in-depth presentation of the various approaches that make up the so-called ethical *turn* in anthropology, see Urbano 2020.

sulting, are ethical practices because subjects can more or less reflexively produce a moral evaluation of them.

Second, a clear definition of what, in this context, is to be understood by care is useful. The way I use it follows closely from the works of Tronto and Fisher, who proceeded to highlight the most relevant analytical aspects of this notion. The two authors state that care is «a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our «world» so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web» (1990: 40). This conception of care appears extremely intriguing because it relates action to something more specific, namely the need to work on and preserve «our own» world. Thus, in order to reason about care, the effects, intentions, and practices have to be related to an image of the world, to a worldview, which brings us towards a double dimension of analysis – ontological and epistemological. Moreover, this worldview finds ample manifestation in intersubjectivity (the «complex, life-sustaining web» of which Tronto and Fisher talk about), which obliges us to consider not only individual patterns of action and cognition but also the way in which subjects co-construct them through negotiation or conflict[4].

Third, from a methodological point of view, this article is based on ethnographic research on organ donation carried out within the context of an applied anthropology project financed by the Organizzazione Toscana Trapianti (OTT). Conducted by a multidisciplinary team consisting of two anthropologists, two nurses, and a psychologist, the project aimed to reconstruct the donation process through follow-up interviews with the families of potential donors. The aim was to understand whether there were any events related to the hospitalisation of a family member eligible for organ donation that could influence the decision to donate[5]. My re-

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[4] The issue of care relationships, particularly when they directly involve two subjects, entails a careful consideration of multiple aspects such as relational asymmetry, power gradients, inequalities, and micro- and macro-forms of violence. An extensive literature has been produced on the ambiguities of care relationships, especially by feminist epistemologies. Here, however, I will confine the analysis to Tronto and Fisher's definition, considering «care» a kind of *vox media* – a quasi-neutral category – that expresses a multiplicity of possible ethical attitudes related to meta-practical *corpora* within the framework of a given inter-subjective worldview. For an in-depth discussion of the care dimension debate, see at least; Buch 2018; Glenn 2010; Ibos 2019; Tronto 1993; 1998.

[5] The title of the project was «Collaborative interventions for the humanisation of

search lasted from December 2018 to March 2020, when the Sars-Cov-2 pandemic made it impossible to continue the ethnographic work taking place in the Transplant Centre of the «Careggi» Hospital in Florence. During the sixteen months of ethnography, we interviewed about 30 families involved in the donation process. All but two had given their consent to organ procurement.

As the pandemic developed and it became impossible to continue the ethnographical work, I focused my attention on four Facebook groups, two Italian and two French. The purpose of these Facebook groups was to allow members to share information and experiences related to organ transplantation and to enable those who wished to do so – both the recipient and the donor's family – to try to find and get in touch with the other person. This second line of research is still ongoing.

This article is based on some of the data collected in the course these two enquiries.

The notion of Cartesian person

What follows is part of an interview with Antonia[6], the daughter of a 75-year-old woman who had died of a brain haemorrhage and whose liver had been harvested and subsequently transplanted into a 58-year-old man. At this stage of the interview, we were discussing Antonia's memories of the time when she had been offered the possibility of donating her mother's organs. The woman was expressing a favourable evaluation of her relationship with the medical staff. However, when recounting the moment when her mother's body was returned after the procurement of the organs, she said:

> I can only say… that it was not clearly explained to me… We were very committed to the display of the body. We agreed to the procurement of the organs and tissues and we were not told that the corpse would have to be closed immediately, to prevent the blood and other fluids from flowing out of the body. This was a problem, because it was important for us to be able to display the

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care: anthropological analysis of the cultural implications in organ donation»; see Di Pasquale 2019; 2022 for a more systematic reflection on the theoretical and applicative goals of this project, as well as the methodological difficulties it presented.

[6] In order to protect the privacy of my interviewee, people's names and contextual elements – such as the name of the Facebook group discussed in the next section – are fictional.

> body and hold a wake for mum. I was very upset about having to close the coffin immediately because I am not very spiritual but very concrete, and I wanted to see her still there, you know? Well, I was told that the procurement would not at all affect what we needed to do afterwards and the viewing before the funeral. But actually, the people in charge of the corpse then said: «No, you see, we have to close casket right now because soon it won't be possible to show it anymore»[7].

The theme of the restitution of the body and the impossibility of carrying out a complex funeral ritual involving the display of the beloved one for several hours recurred, albeit in a more nuanced way, in many of the interviews we conducted. The decision to donate was taken by Antonia, as well as by other people interviewed, in the awareness that all the rites of passage associated with death could be performed, whether secular or religious. In particular, open casket viewing is a ritual component that is often precluded by organ donation because the exudation of bodily fluids makes the display of the body unpleasant or impossible. Healthcare professionals are well aware of this, as Marinella, a nurse in her 50s, told us. She had lost her 83-year-old mother-in-law, who had died of a cerebral haemorrhage and whose liver had been removed and then transplanted into a 66-year-old woman.

Having worked in operating rooms for most of her career, Marinella was very familiar with the practices of corpse manipulation by medical staff[8]:

> In the days of her intensive care unit hospitalisation, the announcement of her death, and the donation proposal, we always felt supported. By contrast, when Tatiana [her mother-in-law] entered the operating room for the procurement, and also in the later stages, we didn't hear anything. We saw her again at the morgue. No one told us how the organ procurement had gone. Not a single person got in touch with us. My brother-in-law noticed that her blouse was buttoned up to the neck and wanted to unbutton it to see how she looked. I told him: «I think they opened her sternum and abdomen. They opened them all up! You can't make a subcostal cut». In short, we saw her again at the morgue, dressed, with no one to help us, no one to tell us anything. We had to do

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[7] Project «Collaborative interventions for the humanisation of care: anthropological analysis of cultural implications in organ donation», 23/01/2020.

[8] In this regard, see also the invaluable works of Claire Boileau (1997; 2002), which offer insightful ethnographies of body management and surgical practices related to organ procurement.

> everything quickly! When she comes out of the operating room, she is dead, I know it. However, the hope is that even at that stage someone will tell you: «Look, we were able to do these things, to harvest these organs». Sure, you tell yourself that you will receive the letter at home. But it's not the same thing. On the other hand, I thought: «What was the surgeon supposed to tell us? Or the transplant coordinators? Maybe it's better for ordinary people not to give details, not to say anything». I remember a friend who worked at the DEAS[9] once told me: «I don't know... if something happened to my son, I would never give consent for donation because l see what happens in the operating room»[10].

In Marinella's statements the emphasis is more on the technical aspects of managing the body and the lack of communication with the family, apart from obtaining consent for organ procurement. Again, there is a mismatch here between the way the deceased is treated by the medical staff and the affective, cultural, and ritual needs of the family members. The remark «We had to do everything very quickly!» indicates the impossibility of reconciling the temporality of certain funeral ritual practices with the technical temporality of organ donation. This runs parallel to the expression that is evoked and which is part of a colleague's experience: «I see what happens in operating rooms». The semantic domain covered by such an expression remains strongly linked to the processes of objectification of the body by the medical staff, as Sharp (1995; 2006) has clearly demonstrated[11].

This is confirmed by the conversations between the hospital staff. I vividly remember my first visit to the Centro Regionale Allocazione Organi e Tessuti [Regional Organ and Tissue Allocation Centre] (CRAOT). The place consisted of a few small rooms with doctors and nurses running around frantically. Voices overlapped. And then, on a wall, I saw a large bookshelf with dozens of green and blue binders. Each had the name of an organ and a date written on it: liver 2015, liver 2016, kidneys 2018,

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[9] The DEAS is the Emergency Department of the Careggi Hospital; cf. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.aou-careggi.toscana.it/internet/images/docs/file/ServizioCivile/documenti/progetti/17_SCR_Prog_DEAS.pdf.

[10] Project «Collaborative interventions for the humanisation of care», 30/05/2019.

[11] Although I cannot discuss the issue in depth here, it is important to emphasise that medical staff are not subject to a single homogeneous representation of the suffering body, even though processes of objectification of the body are often observed in practice – linguistic and otherwise. On the forms of representational resistance to the sick body as body-object by healthcare staff, see Jensen 2016.

hearts 2010, corneas 2013, lungs 2017, and so on. Each of these binders contained countless papers: the clinical histories of donors or transplant recipients. Usually, in a hospital ward, there is an archive of medical records: huge piles of files, each with a person's first and last name, at most the date of birth. Instead, in the CRAOT, people's names dissolve into the organ that represents them. As I looked at these binders, I thought, as I wrote in my diary a few hours later: «If I died today, as an organ donor, tomorrow I could be renamed "liver 2018"». As I gazed at this hustle and bustle, a nurse answered the phone and, at the end of the call, addressed her colleagues: «There was a car accident a few hours ago. We may have a heart, lungs, and kidneys». Another, smiling enthusiastically, exclaimed: «Wow! A complete one,» meaning that a complete procurement of organs and tissue could probably be achieved. Such interactions were certainly not infrequent. The standard vocabulary used by health personnel consisted of a transition from the person to the organ. Rarely did I hear descriptions of the person that, in some way, drew attention to the history of the deceased. Generally, the donors referred to were defined by the organ of donation. «Today we did two kidneys»; or, «in intensive care unit we have one at risk of brain death. If his family donates, tomorrow we should have a liver and two lungs». Those kidneys, liver and lungs, together with some biographical and historical data of their previous owner, then went to compose the materials collected in the binders.

Certainly, there are legal and bureaucratic reasons for this sort of practice. The anonymity of the donor, not least for the respect due to his family context and his person, must be preserved. Therefore, the transfiguration of the person – with his history, his affections, his memories, his relationships – in the donated organ meets a criterion of protection. However, both the facility and the flippancy of healthcare personnel talking about kidneys, livers and lungs, instead of «a man of 40, a woman of 60, a child of 10» also show us something different. In fact, it demonstrates a process of embodiement, not only linguistically, of a far more materialistic and organicist worldview than we are given to suppose.

These ethnographic vignettes, apparently unrelated to each other, share a common thread: a specific conception of the person that I would like to call «Cartesian». The Cartesian person underlies the representational system embodied by healthcare workers and is based on the inseparable connection between the concept of person and the unity established between mind and body, with a certain pre-eminence of the former. Such a representation – usually called biomedical – places the possibility of the person's existence exclusively on the side of life. The moment life vanishes, through cardiac arrest or loss of brain activity, the person vanishes with it. This notion places the person within a discrete temporality (in the mathematical sense): just as life is clearly separable from death, so the person's presence is clearly separable from his or her absence. What remains of the person at the moment of death is only matter – *res extensa*, as Descartes puts it. Organs and tissues, to put it in medical language. At most, a corpse.

The disregard in the restitution of the corpse, in Antonia's case; the lack of management of communication and information, in Marinella's case, as well as the statement of her colleague who affirms that, knowing what happens in the operating theatre, she would never give consent to the procurement in the case of a loved one; the expressive ways in which the health personnel indicate the donors, through a reduction to the organ-object; all these evidences could be interpreted in terms of poor deontology, of inexperience. Or, they could be reduced to individual, personal faults for the doctor or nurse. On the contrary, these attitudes, these postures are deeply rooted in the way a certain practice and a certain discursiveness (the medical one, in particular) construct a vision of the world. They provide a specific status to certain fundamental notions, first and foremost that of person. This Cartesian notion of the person makes it possible to produce a series of representations that shape the actions of subjects, particularly physicians, but not only. First, linking the disappearance of the person to the precise moment of death makes it possible to transform the «who» into a «what». The person gives way to a mass of organic substances: blood, organs, tissues. The second implication, which is also conveyed by the concept of brain death, leads us to consider the «mechanical remains» of what was once a person as a fundamental therapeutic resource for other patients (Steiner 2001; 2004; see also Lock 2001). Faced with the remains of a person who can now only exist as a memory but whose presence has no relationship with the material support to which he or she was attached (the body), there are only two alternatives: either leave this organic material to putrefy and decompose, or resignify it, converting it into a kind of organic matter with therapeutic utility. A final implication concerns the relational scheme involving the deceased: insofar as it is a dead body and no longer a person, a mere corpse, it can no longer be considered a patient, and the relationship that health professionals establish with it is one of pure utility. This corpse is a reservoir of resources that enter into a wider social circulation and that, from this moment on, involve other dying patients whose lives can be saved or prolonged thanks to a transplant (Potts 2007; Grafiteaux 2009). The person who until recently was a patient is transformed into a dispensary of therapeutic opportunities, whose protection is necessary for the sole purpose of making such resources available to those in need. It is still a logic of care that is established, but it no longer concerns the one who is dead, but the one who is about to die. An Other, unknown to the doctors themselves, whose situation imposes itself as a priority.

If we place this notion of person within a broader and more articulated worldview, grounded to some extent in webs of concepts, in paradigms (such as materialist positivism), in values, we see how it works perfectly. It allows doctors to get out of the impasse of the non-curable sick person. It ensures the permanence of their practice in the register of care, addressing the curable sick person. It is a game of gazes and depends on where we turn ours. In this case, the sick person who dies is no longer a person and becomes a therapeutic resource; the curable sick person can receive an organ and the doctor holds firm to the ethical value of his practice, which is that of taking on the suffering of others by trying to heal them. At the centre of this game, of this social scene, the Cartesian notion of the person plays a pivotal role. Noticing this element of care is crucial to understanding how reductive, at the very least, are the narratives that tend to fixate on the role of transplantologists as mere organ harvesters, insensitive to the suffering of others[12]. Indeed, they fail to recognise that it is within a specific ontological construction of the social notion of the person that the moral possibility of «caring for» someone else, that is of fulfilling the assigned social mission, opens up – in this case, no longer caring for the *potential donor*, but for the patient awaiting a specific therapeutic technology: the organ transplant. This ethical stance of physicians and transplantologists has frequently been criticised by scholars (see also Potts 2007; Grafiteaux 2009; but also Quéré 2010; Basualdo 2010), who see in it only the utilitar-

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[12] This kind of stance is frequently observed among those who reject organ donation, as Waissman shows in his ethnographies (1996; 2001). See also the documents and bulletins produced by national and international associations fighting against organ donation, such as the *Lega Nazionale Contro la Predazione di Organi e la Morte a Cuore Battente* [*National League Against Organ Predation and Beating Heart Death*] and the *Pro-vita e Famiglia* [*Pro-Life and Family Movement*], which deserve in-depth analysis: see http://www.antipredazione.org/; https://www.provitaefamiglia.it/blog/predazione-degli-organi-apriamo-gli-occhi.

ian interest in a dead person. However, it becomes more comprehensible when one considers that the medical interest in the procurement of organs from a corpse is associated with the impossibility of identifying the presence of a person within that cadaver. The whole clinical and ethical focus therefore shifts elsewhere, to a living patient who is still a person, meaning someone to be cured.

The notion of the diffuse person

Although the scientific and materialist notion of «person» that I have just discussed seems to be the dominant one in our historical and cultural context, the ethnographic evidence that has emerged in recent research makes it possible to argue that, among the notions of person that are mobilised by social actors within local forms of epistemology (but also ontology), there is a very different one: the notion of the «diffuse person».

The analysis of the Facebook groups mentioned in the introduction offers several important supporting elements. These Facebook groups were created to allow donor families and recipients to contact and meet each other, since in Italy, as in many other countries, donors and recipients must remain anonymous. The virtual community, on the other hand, offers the possibility of bypassing the constraint of anonymity, if the parties involved are interested in doing so and are lucky enough to find each other in the same virtual reality. The function of Facebook groups, however, has changed: nowadays, it seems that these communities are mainly structured around the sharing of stories and experiences, creating a relatively large mutual aid community[13].

I would therefore like to analyse some of these shared experiences, in which we can glimpse specific constellations of concepts and notions that animate, albeit often implicitly, the logics of organ donation.

November 2021. Facebook group *Dalla sofferenza alla vita. Il dono di organi*. 2.37 a.m. A young woman, whose child has received a liver transplant, writes:

> Tomorrow it will be thirty days since my baby was called to receive a new liver. You are always in my thoughts [to the donor] and I thank your family who, despite the pain, have gifted us a new life. You will always be with us!

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[13] Here is the number of members for each Facebook group: *Donare e ricevere,* 3,800 members; *Dalla sofferenza alla vita. Il dono di organi,* 6,000 members; *Le don d'organes. Rencontrons-nous*, 2,000 members; *Les amis du don d'organes*, 4,500 members.

At 4.12 a.m., another mother, who often intervenes in the Facebook group, replies:

> So much courage and immense strength and love in these people who have chosen to let their child live on in yours.

When I first came across such a post, I had only been observing these Facebook groups for a few days. At that time, I was mainly interested in trying to reconstruct the formation of gift relationships in a context rendered apparently aseptic by a regulatory system that is designed precisely to break these socio-relational ties. I was aiming to investigate these aspects through the words of donors and recipients who spoke openly because of the form of cultural intimacy (Hertzfeld 2016)[14] produced in a closed social context geared towards a common object. However, I was drawn to the many religious images that users attached to the Facebook groups and the emphasis on the angelic (for the religious) and heroic (for the secular) dimensions of the donors (Quarta 2023). In trying to trace these narrative processes of donor representation, I began to pay attention to the question of the donor's survival beyond death, precisely through his or her permanence in the form of the donated organ.

One of the first messages I read about this phenomenon in that Facebook group was a post from a middle-aged man, who left a message thanking a donor on 15 February 2020:

> It was five years ago today that we received the call for my wife's lung. I thank and embrace those Sicilian people who chose to donate and let their loved one live on. Francesca is well and we love you.

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[14] Although the concept coined by Herzfeld is designed to help understand certain processes of identity construction on a political and geopolitical level, I find that it can be well applied, albeit with some strain, to a context such as the one examined in this article. These communities are very closed, as their members identify themselves with the *exemplary* value of an experience that sets them all apart from the outside world. As a young member of the Facebook group *Dalla sofferenza alla vita* put it: «I am glad you have taken me in, because you are the only ones who can understand me, and I feel at home with you». It is therefore the experience of donation or transplantation that binds the members of the Facebook group together, offering them a safe space, ideally free of misunderstanding, since the meaning and significance of the words and experiences shared are immediately understood by the others right on the basis of this common identity – being an active subject in the world of organ donation.

A few days later, on 24 February of the same year, in the *Donare e ricevere* Facebook group, I found another post, this time by a mother who had lost her son and who wrote:

> My little boy, my Paolo, died of a brain haemorrhage in 2015. Initially, I wanted to refuse organ donation but, faced with so much pain, I decided to donate everything. The heart was transplanted into a 16-year-old girl who, I was told, was dying. My greatest wish is to feel my Paolo's heart again. Whoever you are, please give me the chance to look into your eyes and hear that heart beating again!

A man replied within a few minutes:

> You are a great mum: one day, hopefully very soon, you will be able to feel that heartbeat again. Thank you from all of us who have been transplanted.

A very long exchange of comments follows. Many users of the Facebook group, unable to relate to this representation of the relationship between donor and recipient, responded to the woman, in an increasingly aggressive manner, pointing out to her that this way of experiencing donation and transplantation is potentially very dangerous. One woman wrote:

> Calm down! She is a little girl and it must have been very difficult for her too. I am sure she gives thanks every day for this gift.

A man, who identified himself as the father of a donor, added:

> I understand your suffering. However, let us be careful what we write. There is a little girl on the other side who has suffered so much and to tell her that she has a life thanks to you is not a nice thing to do. I understand your pain and I thank you with all my heart for your wonderful loving act.

The last reply from Paolo's mother is surprising:

> But she does [have a life thanks to me]. I have given her back a life. If Paolo did not live in her, she would no longer be there.

The initial hypothesis, which leaned more towards a psychological approach, was that this imaginary survival of the person beyond death through the incorporation of body parts into a living «host» was a temporary response to the grief felt at unexpected and emotionally charged bereavements, such as the loss of a child at a young age. This reaction is more common among donor families. We must bear in mind that, in the case of transplants, exceptional conditions must be met in order for someone to be considered a potential donor, first and foremost that the deceased must be «healthy». This means that donors are often people who have been victims of accidents or sudden pathological events (such as a cerebral haemorrhage), but who are generally in good health. The death of these people is an unexpected event. I therefore thought that the idea that they could continue to live in the bodies of others was linked to the exceptional conditions of their death and, above all, to the possibility of donating organs with a high symbolic value such as the heart or the corneas: the heart, because it is often considered to be the receptacle of emotionality and, for centuries, was regarded as the seat of the soul as the principle of life; the corneas – considered synecdochically equivalent to the eyes – because they are linked to the gaze, and thus to the functions of sight. However, in the months and years that followed, ethnographic data led me to abandon this explanatory model – a little too functionalist – that focused on the phenomenon's elements of «exceptionality» and suggested a culturally oriented emotional response. Instead, there appears to be something far more relevant at the core. This is illustrated by some of the following posts.

Facebook group *Dalla sofferenza alla vita*. July 2022. An anonymous member writes:

> You are not gone, but live inside me.

A father immediately replies:

> Our son also lives. 10 years ago his organs were removed. I don't know where you are today, but I know you are still here, inside someone. Have a good life, my love.

And the anonymous person from the first message replies:

> I would be happy to know that he lives inside me. If so, know that I will always take care of him.

Another message, from the French Facebook group *Les amis du don d'organes*, left by a woman in her 60s. November 2022.

> My 82-year-old father suffered encephalic death and donated his liver. We hope that the recipient is well and are eager to meet him, to thank him. He keeps our dear and beloved father alive.

I would like to conclude this ethnographic section, to which hundreds of such posts could be added, with two more exchanges from the French Facebook group *Le don d'organes. Rencontrons-nous*. The first message is from an elderly woman, Léonie, who talks about her nephew's transplant:

> Yesterday, my nephew had a kidney transplant. He had been waiting for it for 4 years. He has 4 children. His little ones have never seen their father in good health. Everything is fine now. I wanted to express my boundless gratitude to the donor and his family for such a generous act. I think of you always.

A woman replies after about a day:

> I hope that the recovery after the transplant will be fast enough. I am the mother of a donor and I am happy that this choice is a rebirth for suffering people.

Léonie replies shortly afterwards:

> Thank you for your act. I hope that knowing that people like my nephew are alive thanks to your relatives will help you ease your pain. Your loved ones are not dead, they are not gone. They still live on in their hosts. And, on our side, there is and always will be infinite gratitude and care.

Another exchange of comments taking place on 2 November 2023, within the same Facebook group, illustrates my point even better. The author is the sister of a man who died in a car accident. Because of his young age and excellent health, he was able to donate all his organs and tissues. Isabelle, his sister, wrote the following message:

> I often think of the recipients.
> How are they?
> Are they taking care of my brother?
> Is my brother happy to be with them?

A few days later, among the many messages of solidarity and sympathy, there was one from Zoé, the mother of a transplanted boy:

> To answer your question, «Are they taking care of my brother?», the answer is no! They are taking care of their organ, not the donor's organ. The organ is inside them and it belongs to them. This is my point of view and that of my son who was transplanted 15 years ago, at the age of 18.

Isabelle, offended, replied:

> Bitch!
> If you have to answer with this bullshit, just shut up! I don't need a Ms. Know-it-all to come and kick my ass.

The idea of a psychological reaction to an «inconceivable» event gives way to a different perspective: a more transversal model emerges, which also involves the recipients or the sons and daughters of elderly donors, and which is more or less as socially acceptable as the altruistic model based on what I called the *Cartesian person*[15] in the previous section. In this model of donation, the choice is accompanied by the construction of a notion of the person that I will call «diffuse», in the sense that it is not related to an inseparable psycho-somatic unity that would constitute the

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[15] I find it necessary to make a brief methodological digression in this section. Compared to classical ethnographic investigations, the purely textual ethnographic data extrapolated from exchanges of comments in a Facebook group can seem very reductive. Ethnographic research should provide for the possibility of direct interlocution with social actors and continuous observation of the context in which they are immersed, in order to be able to analyze in depth the issues at stake, the semantic layers, the cosmologies, and the everyday practices that construct the horizons of meaning and action of the subjects. This is largely impossible in the case of a Facebook group. However, anthropologists have long pointed out that social media are not just tools but real communities, with their own norms, codes, practices, forms of interaction, and construction of shared horizons (Miller 2011). Certainly, much of the ethnographic work done on Facebook has included a detailed analysis of the ways in which subjects used the digital tool within their own non-virtual worlds (Mod 2010; Miller *et al.* 2018). But if we assume that, in their evolution, some social media – particularly Facebook – have created digital communities that are no less real than their non-virtual counterparts (Hiltz 1984; Plant 2004), and that the dimension of textualization allows for an equally in-depth, if not exhaustive, analysis of the worldviews of the subjects interacting within such communities, then the Facebook groups considered in this article certainly shed some interesting light on a phenomenon such as organ donation. Through what they say, the way in which they say it, and the way in which they interact, we can begin to see the emergence of implicit cultural elements such as the notions of gift, identity, and person, all of which play out around the culturally established frontier between life and death.

individual. The person inhabits the parts, the material components of the body, which, although reduced to their purely objective and material dimension, inherit qualities and biographical paths that defined the subject before his or her death.

With regard to the body donation, Jacques Godbout (2006) had recognised the formation of a *hybrid person* in certain transformative experiences of the recipient, thereby proceeding in the same direction as Sharp (1995; 2006)[16]. The condition for this to be possible is that, for some social actors, the person is not defined by the relationship between a spiritual (or cognitive) principle and a somatic unity (the body). The *Cartesian person* gives way to the *diffuse person*. As Kopytoff (1986) has clearly illustrated, objects have dense biographies that collect the qualities of those who have possessed, exchanged, or lost them. The same holds true for the object-organ, which, much more deeply, can embody the essence of the person it was part of and which, for this reason, allows it to survive in new forms within the body of a «host» that receives it[17]. The object-organ thus becomes a person-organ.

Concluding remarks

Before leaving the reader with some concluding remarks, I will briefly recapitulate what has been presented so far.

First, I have argued that there are *at least* two different models of the «person» in our contemporary cosmology. The first, the *Cartesian person*,

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[16] Elsewhere, still on the basis of the ethnographic material presented here, I have had the opportunity to reflect on the ways in which the person is *hybridized*, starting precisely from the narrative of the transformative experiences of transplant recipients who, in this structural transformation of their Selves, recognize the action of the donor person, embedded through transplantation (Quarta 2023). These are profound and radical experiences: it is not uncommon for recipients to perceive a structural transformation of the Self, coupled with a change in their tastes, habits, and identity. The Self is made up of biographical elements supposedly belonging to the donor, whose permanence is guaranteed by the installation of the organ vector in a host body. For the Italian context, see, for example, Mitola 2011a; 2011b; 2012; fundamental, in this sense, are also the works of Sharp (2006; 2007).

[17] The topic of the permanence of the person in single parts of the body echoes anthropological reflections that are well established in the literature, the best-known example of which is certainly Marylin Strathern's work on the Melanesian person (1988), to which can be added the more recent work by Francesco Remotti (2019; 2021) on the composite notion of the person.

is strongly linked to an individualistic conception of life. The body and the cognitive faculties are closely intertwined. Their unity, which is materialized in the individual, would constitute the concept of the person. The cessation of one of these two elements leads to the definitive cessation not only of life but also of the person.

The second model is that of the *diffuse person*. The person, in this case, does not correspond to the singularity represented by the individual, but is literally and concretely *diffused* into the various somatic components. The person survives in the individual organs or tissues and lives on through the incorporation of the person-organ into the recipient's body[18].

Both models also deal with the temporality of life and death, understood as social processes that subjects approach from the perspective of their own cosmologies. The duration and rhythm of these two notions-boundaries (Grossin 1996; Sewell 1996; Bessin 2009) vary considerably from one model to the other. In the case of the *Cartesian person*, life and death are radically separated and develop in a discrete way: that is, it is possible to establish a clear break between what is life and what is death. In addition, life and death are regarded as two homogeneous and distinct temporalities. In other words, there is life here and now, with all its positive signs; a traumatic event – an illness, accident, haemorrhage – marks the end of life and establishes the temporality of death. Thus, the positive signs of death can be recognized here and now. In the case of the *diffuse person*, on the other hand, we are faced with continuous temporalities that are articulated one on top of another, making it very difficult to establish a real break, a clear discontinuity. Therefore, we do not refer to life and death as self-enclosed objects or social facts, but to living and dying as processes that unfold in a duration, according to a rhythm and in forms that cannot be unambiguously defined. Indeed, in the context of a diffuse person, when can one say that an individual is definitively dead? What are the definitive signs of the end of the person? If the self, with all its historicity and biographical capacity, survives in the organs, flows through them into the social body, and then installs itself in the biological body of the recipient, merging with the latter's self and producing a new person, how is it possible to conceive of a clear-cut, discrete, and definite idea of «death»?

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[18] Interestingly, these kinds of experiences are also well represented in the medical literature on transplantation, particularly in the psychological literature, but are contrasted as psychopathological experiences that need to be suppressed in order to establish a healthy recipient psychism; cf. Bash 1973; Mai 1986; Rauch & Kneen 1989.

However, one element is even more relevant. Both representational models are simultaneously produced by and produce epistemologies associated with local ontologies that tend to be incompatible with one another. As I pointed out earlier, they combine to produce very different representational effects. These representational effects, however, do not exist only on the level of cognition, explanation, or theoretical reasoning. They exist, above all, on the level of praxis. They exist and produce effects in the field of morality, in the sense of a corpus of regulative values, and ethics, in the sense of a field of action in relation to which judgments can be made. In this sense, then, ontology should be understood as a derived domain: it is nothing more than the naturalized translation of epistemological and moral representations that produce representative effects in the imaginary. Well, these effects, once subjected to a naturalization process, are translated into local ontologies. However, these ontologies are extremely powerful from the perspective of both morality and epistemology, in the sense that they constantly inform the action and cognition of subjects. If the two notions of the person I have discussed are ontological notions, they entail, from the perspective of social actors, significant modifications in the choices and orientations of their actions: calling the person a «corpse», disregarding the funeral rituals of family members, and directing one's intentions of care towards the only «person» still present, on the one hand; searching for one's loved one in the body of another, choosing to donate in order to sustain life, and understanding care in terms of «caring» for those who survive in the body of a «host», on the other. These are all agentive possibilities that can be evaluated according to a specific moral code that places the fundamental value of care at the center. And they are provided by being located in that field of naturalized representations that we call «ontology».

Formally speaking, both models respond to the same pattern, the same mechanism. The initial event is a considerably traumatic one that produces a specific effect. In the model of the *Cartesian person*, this effect can be denoted by the term «death», whereas in relation to the model of the *diffuse person*, I think it is more correct to use a term that denotes the process: «dying». I have already illustrated the radical difference between these two forms of naming. In both cases, we are faced with an experience of crisis (de Martino 2023) or *moral breakdown* (Zigon 2007) that somehow compels action. It calls for the use of culturally oriented procedures that ensure that the subject can still conceive of himself in a possible world. This urge to act leads them to turn to their own moral imaginary, which in turn is closely linked to the possible structure of the world in which the social actor lives. Different structures provide for different moral imaginaries. Just as different moral imaginaries require different structures. Acting, in this case, means making a choice. In the first case, the choice will transform the person into a corpse, the primary source of therapeutic resources. In the second, by contrast, the choice will approach donation as a way of enabling the person to be able to continue their biological (and social) journey within the body of another. In the first case, care is directed towards the person who is still there. In the second, care is chosen so that one can continue to exist. In turn, those choices are generators of order, i.e. of meaning. In a constant form of circularity, the choices made test the moral imaginary in relation to a given local ontology and epistemology, confirming both. Both, moreover, manifest themselves to us in the lexicon of care. As Tronto states, there are two main ways in which care is declined: *caring about* and *caring for* (Tronto 1998: 16). In the first case, it is an attitude of recognition. This means perceiving and recognising the explicit or implicit need for care that comes from another. In the second, on the other hand, it is a matter of responsibility. In other words, making oneself actively responsible for taking care of the other. Both then have to find practical ways shared between the one who provides care (*caregiver*) and the one who receives it (*care reciver*).

However, in this article I have argued that, beyond the formal definition, the practical content of care is not – and cannot be – independent of the way we think, want, understand and name the world. Local knowledge contributes to the construction of the worldview and the worldview shapes our local knowledge. On the other hand, the naturalisation of these worldviews constructs the world we inhabit in a real, empirical way. In this sense, epistemology and ontology intertwine. Standing at the intersection of these two dimensions of our presence, fundamental notions emerge that express within them, paraphrasing the Maussian notion of total social fact, a total worldpicture (*Weltbild*). One of these is the notion of the person. Alongside it, we can locate the practice of care. What is at stake is that it is precisely by analysing care practices that we can see the emergence of a specific notion of person and an entire world. If we wanted to suspend for a moment what I have called a form of circularity, we could inductively argue as follows: in the practices of care (in who we care for, why we do it, who is included in our care and who is excluded from it) we detect significant elements that allow us to understand what notion of person is operating; starting from the notion of person, then, a way of understanding the world (knowing-epistemology) and a way of constructing the world (entity-ontology) can be observed.

Of course, a reader who finds the two models incompatible, claiming the need for a single legitimate notion of person, body, life, and death, could claim the need to choose between the two: which of the two models is the correct one? Or rather, which is the true one? Or, again, which is the real one, using a strong notion of reality that involves a two-way correspondence between our representations and the objective construction of the external world?

I reject this objection on the grounds that I do not believe it is the task of anthropology to comment on issues that belong at most to the fields of physics, medicine, or philosophy. Rather, I am interested in pointing out how, even with respect to an apparently self-evident notion such as that of the *person*, there exist quite different representational schemes. They are the result of a reciprocal relationship between epistemological forms, ontological forms, and moral forms that give substance to the actions of social subjects. My aim in this article, therefore, has been to make a small contribution to a historicist anthropology capable of showing us, once again, that in different moral worlds (i.e. ontologies), even actions that may appear to be the same or motivated by identical reasons – as in the case of the affirmative decision to donate organs – reveal all the profound differences in the paths that human beings can take in their history.

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Coherent Incoherence. An Anthropology of Far-right Morality

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Abstract

In this article, I aim to contribute to the vibrant development of the anthropology of morality by examining the ethical-moral upbringing of the members of a far-right movement. In other words, I focus on a community built on ethical and moral convictions that numerous observers are likely to consider unethical and immoral. Drawing on my research with youth activists, I demonstrate what they find appealing about the radical nationalist, illiberal agenda that their movement espouses, and what a particular take on morality and ethics has to do with it. In doing so, I wish to make both a theoretical and a methodological contribution. In using the notion of «coherence», I reflect on production and performance of moral rules in the context of a community, and on the tension between different value systems that the analysis of such settings demonstrates. Further, I use the reflections on moral coherence to reflect on the limits and affordances of studying morality ethnographically.

Keywords: Far right, morality, politics, coherence, antiliberalism

Coerente incoerenza. Un'antropologia della moralità di estrema destra

In questo articolo, cerco di contribuire al prolifico dibattito dell'antropologia della morale esaminando la formazione etico-morale dei membri di un movimento di estrema desra. In altre parole, mi concentro su di una comunità costruita su convinzioni etiche e morali che molti osservatori sono propensi a considerare immorali. Basandomi su di una ricerca condotta su giovani attivisti, mostro cosa trovano attraente dell'agenta radicalmente nazionalista e illiberale che il loro movimento sostiene, e quale sia la rilevanza di una particolare prospettiva su morale ed etica. In questo modo, desidero portare un contributo sia teorico che metodologico. Usando la nozione di «coerenza», rifletto sulla produzione e sulla performance di regole morali nel contesto di una specifica comunità e sulla tensione tra diversi *sistemi di valori che l'analisi di tale contesto evidenzia. Inoltre, utilizzo le riflessioni sulla coerenza morale per indagare i limiti e le possibilità dello studio etnografico della morale.*

Parole chiave: estrema destra, morale, politica, coerenza, antiliberalismo

Introduction

«We are simply different» is a statement that I heard in numerous contexts, and different languages, during several years of research on far-right youth activism. While making this statement in a very affirmative manner, my interlocutors – mostly young men – struggled when trying to elaborate what they meant by «different» or how they «differed». It was easier for them to say who was «different» from them – namely, members of mainstream society, and especially its young representatives. They saw the latter as passive, indifferent, uprooted, and damaged by the ideology of liberalism and the effects of globalization. When describing themselves, however, the activists I talked to certainly did not hesitate to portray themselves as an absolute opposite (that is, as active and engaged, as having a sense of belonging and responsibility), but above all as focused on values such as the ability to respect and maintain order, punctuality, keeping quiet (when necessary), and respecting hierarchies. They would say, for example, «We enter a disco… and you can see that we act differently», or, «Members of our groups know when you need to take a broom and do a clean-up».

To the far-right activists I got to know, qualities of this kind constitute a basis of the moral-ethical make-up of a militant. The movements I studied see themselves as educational-cultural, rather than political, and emphasize the importance of inculcating in the young generation of militants a set of rules and values. Drawing inspiration from fascism and kindred radical ideologies, and claiming that they adapt its elements to the new sociopolitical circumstances, they emphasized the importance of building «new men» – carrying out an «anthropological revolution» before embarking on the political one.

Is their focus surprising? On the one hand, when reading the list of the desired qualities that apparently characterize an «ideal militant», one can easily picture rows of fascist militants – marching in order, respecting their leaders, and conveying uniformity. After all, such characteristics do correspond with an image of authoritarian personality that political ideologies such as fascism promoted. On the other hand, whenever the question of the far-right or fascist morality appears in the public discourse, the chief focal point is principles which tend to be seen as a negation of the values widely accepted in so-called Western societies, which we could label «illiberal» or «antiliberal»: intolerance, limitation of personal freedom, rejection of the principle of equality (presuming, of course, that «far-right morality» is considered at all, and not seen as a contradiction in terms). Undoubtedly, due to the fact that in recent years we have become accustomed to news on the far right's violence against migrants or their homophobic statements, it is hard to consider that their moral-ethical preoccupations include keeping the headquarters clean or a commitment to regular participation in martial-arts training; or that what they learn during preparatory courses are elements of Hinduism and Eastern Orthodox tradition. How, then, to explain the importance of a specific moral-ethical upbringing within far-right movements, without, on the one hand, taking the commitment to such principles at face value and, on the other hand, attempting to take the research participants (in this case far-right activists) seriously?

In this article, I aim to contribute to the vibrant development of the anthropology of morality by examining the ethical-moral upbringing of the members of far-right movements, using as a lens the notion of coherence. In activists' narratives, a person who is coherent consistently articulates and lives by certain values, strives to achieve clear goals, and behaves in a manner consistent with their chosen identity or identities: that of a radical nationalist, a patriot, a Catholic, a Christian. These identities correspond with a certain ethical system, and these different ethical systems may sometimes overlap and sometimes come into conflict. Further, to be coherent does not mean that one never changes one's views; as a matter of fact, such a change may be considered proof of coherence. Coherence is thus often invoked precisely when a person's situation and actions appear contradictory (incoherent) to an outside observer. Drawing on my research with youth activists and on theoretical discussions within the anthropology of morality, I show why the notions of both «coherence» and «coherent incoherence» help us to better understand the ways in which moral norms are inculcated and negotiated.

I proceed in the following manner. First, I briefly refer to the scholarly debates on fascist morality and inquire into the implications of these findings for anthropology. This allows me to move to the anthropology of morality and to offer some reflections on key issues we encounter when linking together the focus on fascism with the theoretical-methodological toolkit developed within this field. I highlight two such issues: the problem of studying morals without moralizing (Fassin 2008) and the question of freedom and reproduction of norms. I then illustrate these issues by presenting some material from an ethnographic study that I have been conducting since 2016: first, a biographical account of one far-right activist, and then some scenes featuring the movement she belongs to. While my broader project tackles transnational networking and different national movements – Italian, Polish and Hungarian – in this article I focus predominantly on the Polish far-right movement National Radical Camp (*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny*, ONR), only sparingly making some comparative points to underscore broader trends and co-inspirations between different nationalist movements.

Before moving forward, I would like to clarify the way I understand and use several terms. I describe the movements I studied using – depending on the context – three different terms. The most general term is «far right». I consider this to be the best available umbrella term for identifying those actors that justify a broad range of policy positions for socioeconomic issues on the basis of nationalism and national belonging (see Halikiopoulou 2018; Pirro 2022). Second, I use the term «radical nationalist» to refer to far-right variants that link the nationalist agenda with an anti-communist and anti-capitalist rhetoric, proposing a sort of «third way» socioeconomic order. This is also the emic term that the Polish movement ONR (the main protagonist of this article) adopts most frequently. Third, in some contexts, I employ the term «fascist», which I understand as a form of revolutionary radical nationalism (Mosse 1999). I use the term when talking about the concrete historical manifestations of fascism that contemporary activists draw on. I acknowledge that the definitions of «fascism» and «radical nationalism» can be seen as congruent, yet I distinguish between them to best render the terms used by my research participants (see the section «An ethnography of bad morality» for more details).

Fascists as moral subjects

Unlike anthropologists, who are newcomers to fascist studies, historians and philosophers have long been preoccupied with the problem of fascist morality. Broadly speaking, they have sought to understand what made brutal policies, bloody wars, extermination and genocide possible. The vast majority of works address Nazism, considered to be the most extreme form of fascism. The underlining question of many of these works has been whether it is even possible to talk about «morality» in such a context. A negative answer to this question – the tendency to represent Nazis as deprived of any morality or as espousing a «perverted» morality – persisted for a long time (Kunze 2018: 215-216)[1]. A common feature of such accounts was the view of Nazis as inhuman, bestial monsters. It was only recently that a new wave of studies began to question such approaches. Historians such as Claudia Koonz (2005) emphasized that rather than approaching Nazis/fascists as immoral and inhuman, we need to ask how they redefined and understood the very meanings of «moral» and «human». Further, scholars inquired into the broader context of Nazi/fascist ideas: colonialism, racism, eugenics, and even the complicated heritage of the Enlightenment[2], elements of which Nazis and fascists so strongly opposed.

In so doing, scholars not only asked about what prompted people to be violent, or «why did they kill?», but posed fundamental questions about the inculcation of and compliance with moral norms, the relationship between individual and collective values, competing moral systems, as well as the possibility of (individual and collective) resistance against a moral system one does not accept or wants to break free from. Further, they demonstrated that attempts at presenting Nazis as demonic and abnormal were often meant to underscore the difference between the perpetrators and the rest of the (innocent) society, and ignore the question of complicity and co-responsibility.

Clearly, historians and philosophers have been asking questions that scholars working in the field of anthropology of morality/ethics have also been preoccupied with. Why, then, do relatively few works in this field tackle the problems such as «far-right morality»? The answer to this question relates, at least partly, to the second observation made above: while decades ago a particular representation of Nazis served to exculpate the rest of society and present its members as profoundly different, today's reluctance to engage with far-right actors may be explained by our (anthropologists' but also the broader audience's) unwillingness to recognize some troublesome affinities between far-right actors and the rest of the society. I have discussed this problem elsewhere (Pasieka 2024), arguing that the reluctance to study the far right ethnographically results from the fact that far-right militants and supporters appear at once too distant and too close. Engaging with

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[1] Such approaches were quite common, even though in the decades following the Second World War scholars emphasized the ordinariness rather than monstrosity of Nazis (e.g. Mayer 1955). Hannah Arendt, in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, described Nazis as "terrifyingly normal" and as resembling clowns rather than monsters.

[2] On the heritage of the Enlightenment in the context of fascism, see e.g. Mosse 1999.

the far right thus often means facing the fact that ideas and values deemed «far-right» or «fascist» are embedded in *our* everyday practices, values, and political institutions, as well as realizing that it is much easier to talk about racist movements than to acknowledge to what extent access to education, healthcare, and opportunity continue to attest to racial difference.

This problem is not limited, however, to the kind of politics I am describing here. Anthropology of morality tends to neglect not only the far right but numerous other «non-sympathetic» actors: political and religious extremists of various hues, the military, gang members, people involved in ritualized acts of violence, to name but a few. Doubts over whether it is possible to study people who commonsense suggests should be defined as «immoral» persist, even though numerous anthropologists have argued to the contrary. For example, in engaging with Susan Harding's seminal work on «repugnant others», Webb Keane observes (2014: 444) that «an anthropology that confines its efforts only to understanding those of whom the anthropologist approves, and ignores what Susan Harding (1991) called 'the repugnant other,' is hardly worthy of the name. It will certainly leave out of its purview a large part of the range of actually existing human realities». Similarly, Didier Fassin (2008) argues for an anthropology «beyond good and evil» and the need to takes moralities as an object of study, no matter what kind of morality or whose morality we are talking about. The tendency to focus on «the oppressed rather than the oppressors, the poor rather than the rich, the dominated classes» is strongly criticized by Wiktor Stoczkowski, who states emphatically that «moral anthropology runs the risk of remaining limited to phenomena morally approved by ordinary thought, to the detriment of those that do not automatically benefit from the same status». For «if there is a 'moral economy' in anthropology, it is also one of a preferential investment in the study of topics offering a social recognition return value proportional to the sympathy that is granted to them out of hand» (2008: 349). In this paper, as in my other works (Pasieka 2024), I strive to respond to these calls by examining far-right activists' conceptualizations of morality and ethics and how these renderings relate to their views on politics and society and their goals as movements.

An ethnography of «bad» morality

In discussing the terms I employ, I emphasized that naming and labeling is quite challenging in research on the far right. In the course of my fieldwork, I have engaged in numerous conversations in which my attempts to understand how activists define themselves were met with resistance. When I asked what terms best describe them, I would hear, first, that they were not fascist as fascism is an «outdated» concept, used by their proponents to discredit them, and that drawing inspiration from fascism – as they proudly do – does not mean «copying» it. Further, they would claim that they are not right-wing or at least not completely right-wing, and fear the term «right» due to the connotations with the neoliberal right that they despise, seeing themselves as the aforementioned third-way alternative; hence the preference for radical nationalism. Finally, they would always emphasize that they differ from political parties and that they constitute *communities.*

More precisely, they like to see themselves as *ethical communities*. This is a term I first heard in Italy, but which ONR members gladly accepted as perfectly capturing their self-understanding and their goals: to educate a new generation, in the spirit of a particular ethics and morality, and through cultural upbringing. It is a notion that bears a resemblance to some interwar fascist movements, especially Corneliu Zelea Codreanu's legionary movement, which put a strong emphasis on spirituality and ethical upbringing (see Clark 2015; Haynes 2008). The idea of «ethical communities» presumes ethics to be a broad concept – it can be understood as a way of modeling proper behavior, as an approach to other people, as a «style of life», as a set of binding rules – and, crucially, it implies the community to be a locus of ethics. This fact has important implications for examining the far right's critique of liberalism (especially individualism).

In the ethnographic part of this article, I strive to zoom in on such community moments and on the importance of the community for individual members. When discussing the activists' subjectivities and the system of norms and values they claim to adhere to, I use «morality» interchangeably with «ethics». I made this choice for two reasons. First, although some anthropologists suggest that it is important to establish a distinction between societal convention/constraints (morality) and individual freedom/choice (ethics), such a differentiation does not make much sense in the context of my research. Rather, I find it crucial to emphasize the tension between norms held by a collectivity and individuals' choice to obey them, challenge them or diverge from them. To me, this tension does not indicate a tension between morality and ethics, but rather shows that understandings of «collective» and «individual», as of «constraint» and «choice», are contextual and entangled (see Miller & Lukes 2022).

Second, my research demonstrates that we need to consider different «moralities» and «ethical systems». Activists may evoke their community's «ethics» in one context, in another stress «Christian ethics», in another still refer to a philosopher or fascist ideologue they esteem, and in another mention «universal rules». If individual/collective norms interact, overlap or clash, the same is true for different moral/ethical systems. Third, I also find problematic the distinction between deliberate and non-deliberate modes of pursuing moral lives. The discussions on morality and ethics carried out by anthropologists frequently picture the former as unconscious following of moral rules, and the latter as conscious reflecting of acts. For instance, James Laidlaw understands (2014: 23) as ethics «the capacity to reflect and criticize, to imagine other and higher standards than those that are prevalent in the surrounding society», while Jarrett Zigon claims (2009: 261) that ethics is what is done when one calls morality into question. Again, this distinction is hard to uphold in the context of my research. Far-right activists persistently criticize certain moral/ethical systems: they attack «liberal morality» or «liberal-left progressivism», while simultaneously emphasizing the superiority of their movements' ethics, an ethics that they *willingly* subscribe to and consider absolutely *binding*. Thus, their choice (or «reflective act») does not entail a rejection of a collective moral system in favor of an individualistic, freely, deliberately crafted one, but rather a substitution of one system of norms for another.

One of the goals of my article is thus a theoretical one: I aim to show how a study of far-right morality contributes to the broader theoretical discussion within anthropology of morality and ethics. In considering the centrality of the discourse of *community*, I demonstrate how a hierarchically organized, tight community affects thinking about and performing moral rules, and, conversely, in what way the performance of rules is constitutive of that community. The second goal is to provoke, rather than to answer, an epistemological question: What are the limits of studying morality and ethics? I mentioned above that it is by the very choice of research subjects that we establish who can engage in moral reasoning and who can «have» a moral universe, and some actors tend to be granted that right more often than others. However, in pondering the limits of ethnography, I also wish to ask what kind of insights into morality we, as ethnographers, can provide beyond examining how ethical/moral choices are discussed, negotiated, reinforced in a community setting. Can we make some major claims as to what these choices *are* or *were*?

The ethnographic insights that I use to illustrate these issues come from my research with the Polish movement ONR. The ONR dates to the 1930s. Banned under communism, it was reestablished in the early 1990s and has been functioning since then with variable success and energy. Contemporary activists are proud of the movement's roots in the interwar era and emphasize that, while drawing inspiration from fascism, the ONR ideologues of the time were designing their own political program based on radical nationalism[3]. Apart from being the source of symbols and slogans and inspirations for the contemporary ONR, the prewar predecessor constitutes an object of interesting comparisons. First, although now as then these movements exist in the public imaginary primarily as a violent mob marching through the cities, students and well-educated people have constituted their base (Krzywiec 2019: 632). Second, their impact on political life has been marginal as well as overstated. If the ONR can be said to play a role, it is mostly by providing an alibi for other right-wing parties, which also do not refrain from nationalistic rhetoric[4], but use the ONR to differentiate themselves from the «extremists». Third, there is a continuity in terms of the ideological agenda: the ONR strongly emphasizes the attachment to Christian, and more specifically Catholic tradition and the idea of a «Polish Catholic state»; an ethnic conceptualization of national communities[5]; the importance of the discourse on the «normal», «natural» family, and implicitly on traditional gender roles (and hierarchies); a very strong anti-communist and anti-capitalist orientation; illiberalism, broadly understood – at the political, economic and cultural levels. Finally, a key ideological aspect, linking various dimensions, is radical antisemitism. For interwar ONR activists, Jews constituted *the* enemy of the «Polish nation». Exclusionary rhetoric, discrimination and violence against Jews had been carried out on economic, political and racial grounds. Antisemitic tropes were also very common in their critique of the modern (capitalist)

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[3] Historians of the interwar period agree that seeing the ONR only through the prism of fascism is limiting, as it is limiting to see the ONR as *the* Polish fascism, which constitutes a much broader phenomenon (Krzywiec 2019).

[4] This tendency has been visible in recent years especially in the political discourse on migration.

[5] As I explain in my recent monograph, this aspect has slowly begun to be contested by some group leaders, who claim that it is possible to «become» a Pole.

world. Although the present-day ONR claims to have cut ties with that «tradition», the impact of interwar antisemitic slogans and a tendency to use various social, political, and economic phenomena and institutions («Brussels», «capitalists», «Euroatlantic lobby») as code for Jews is widespread and their use during demonstrations has had legal consequences. It ought to be added, however, that the contemporary ONR seems to be more divided when it comes to antisemitism, with an increasing number of members rejecting it as «primitive» and «denigrating» for the movement, and/or distinguishing between antisemitism and criticism of Israel[6].

In terms of the movement's organization, members are usually in their twenties and thirties, and predominantly male. The movement is divided into regional branches (*brygady*), led by regional leaders, and at the national level it is headed by a board composed of three people. It organizes a variety of events: from commemorations for soldiers killed during the Second World War, through martial-arts training, to blood donation drives. The character of events at least in part corresponds with specific regional needs and the demographics that dominate in a given chapter; these might be students in one case, and soccer fans (or «ultras») in another. Generally, the movement's demographics are quite diverse, and during an event one is as likely to sit at a table with a lawyer, a bartender, a forester, a history student, or a well-off entrepreneur. Generally speaking, the kind of activities I have just listed as well as the facts regarding the movement's demographics are not something the movement is known for in Poland. If it features in the media, this is because of the demonstrations and marches it organizes and the court cases in which the ONR had to account for antisemitic and racist slogans which continue to be a part of such demonstrations.

Considering the numerous important ethnographies of the far right (in its various manifestations) and discussions on methodological and ethical challenges such research implies, I do not wish to repeat here the arguments on why such research is both needed and possible; or how difficult it is to establish and maintain rapport and, simultaneously, how surprising that rapport might be at times (e.g., Ezekiel 1995; Pilkington 2016; Riccardi-Swartz 2022; Shoshan 2016; Pasieka 2019; 2024). In presenting my material, I am simply including some comments and reflections which show what I meant to do this research. I emphasize «some», as describing

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[6] Similarly to the movements they are friendly with abroad, the ONR has been sympathizing with the Palestinian cause.

in detail what listening to antisemitic comments or homophobic rhetoric has meant to me in the course of this research, and how hard «exercises in understanding» were in such contexts, would transform this piece into a kind of auto-ethnography that I do not wish to write. I shall therefore limit myself here to two observations. First, despite the emotional and psychological costs of this research, I consider that ethnography – understood here as a specific method of knowledge production – provides us with unique insights into far-right worldviews *and* how to challenge them, without falling into the «us/them» trap which dangerously reproduces the far-right rhetoric. Second, my study shows the necessity to move beyond the somewhat worn-out notion of empathy as a prerequisite of ethnographic practice. Following Christian Giordano (1998), I find the Weberian concept «Verstehen» – a combination of «understanding» and «explanation» – to be a better epistemological and analytical tool than attempts to «try to walk in someone's shoes». In other words, the fact I do not wish to walk in the shoes of the far-right activists did not prevent me from walking alongside them in their marches, in an attempt to understand what they do, why they do it and what meaning they give to it.

Becoming an activist

In the fieldnotes from my meeting with Janka, a thirty-year-old ONR member, I find the following passage: «It was one of the most difficult conversations I have had [in the course of this project]. 'Small talk' was out of the question, I felt like I was interrogating her. I kept asking one question after another as her answers were so short». We met in a small café in Krakow, near to a busy intersection, and in the frequent moments of silence she stared at the passers-by and city traffic. A few years after that encounter, I still remember my uneasiness about Janka's shyness. Looking back, I realize that she simply contrasted with the majority of my interlocutors – male activists – who tended to convey confidence and were very keen to share information about their movements, activities and mission. And yet that difficult conversation is one of those I have returned to numerous times, as it has inspired a lot of my thinking about far-right morality.

I met Janka for the first time during a gathering of the Krakow section of ONR, the very first one I attended. The section leader introduced me as a researcher working on a book on the «national question» and emphasized I could be trusted – which likely meant I was not a journalist striving to discredit them or a secret services informer[7]. The gathering took place in the movement's headquarters – a small garage transformed into a meeting place, filled with chairs, a table, a library of «nationalist thought», and portraits of far-right leaders. The event was divided into two parts. The first featured a lecture on philosophy, discussing the idea of beauty according to Aristotle. The second, shorter one was devoted to organizational matters. One of the issues discussed was a Christmas celebration, and the section leader expressed hope that the two female members would take care of food. Janka and her colleague nodded politely, without saying a word. I approached Janka after the meeting was over, asking if we could meet privately; she just nodded politely.

On the day of our meeting, Janka was waiting for me in front of the café we chose. She differed from the people passing by. On a hot summer day, she was wearing a dark knee-long skirt, a buttoned-up elegant blouse, a leather handbag and pumps. Her image made me think about photos from the interwar period, perhaps an unsurprising reference considering the ideological horizon she and her colleagues find most inspiring.

We began our conversation by discussing what had prompted Janka to join the ONR. Contrary to other activists, who struggled to provide a definite response, talking about the «wish to be active» and by and large making evident the randomness of their choice (see Pasieka 2022), Janka had a ready answer. She described an event that had occurred in 2015 and had turned out to be life-changing for her: Robert Winnicki, the then head of a Polish far-right party, had rejected an invitation to join the president and other politicians to light Hanukkah candles in the presidential palace. He had justified his refusal by saying that he also does not celebrate Ramadan or the Hindu festival Holi, and that being faithful to the first commandment («Thou shalt have no other gods before me») precluded his participation. «He was the only one to get out of line», Janka emphasized, «Every Catholic should have behaved this way». In describing Winnicki's act in terms of «courage», she emphasized that the willingness and necessity to stand for what one believes in was the main motivation behind joining a nationalist movement.

Janka established contacts with the ONR a few months later, and after a year of preparatory courses became a full member. When I asked, «Why

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[7] Stories of such experiences – with the people doing research undercover or providing a fake identity – were reported to me by all the groups I studied.

the ONR?», she replied succinctly: «It is less democratic, more hierarchical, and I really like it. Other movements [active in Poland] are in fact national democrats». Talking to Janka, I could see how seriously she took her course and the exam. Today, not only is she truly well-versed in nationalist thought but she regularly expands her knowledge on it and publishes her reflections in the movement's periodical and in the form of blog posts.

Indeed, a good chunk of our talk regarded various nationalist leaders and ideologues, especially from the interwar era, and particularly those that Janka considers to be important moral exemplars. The list of inspiring figures and the commentaries she provided me with are a good example of what I describe elsewhere as «coherent incoherence» (Pasieka 2024).

One such example is the understanding of *uncompromisingness*, which Janka considered the highest possible value and, quoting the episode from the Hanukkah ceremony, described as a quality that she looked for and inspired to when joining a nationalist movement. However, in talking about «moral exemplars» from the past, she mentioned Jan Mosdorf, one of the founders of the interwar ONR. She described him as an intellectually inspiring figure and a leader who knew the *importance of compromise.* In Janka's view, Mosdorf proved this when, after the interwar ONR divided, he refused to take part and did not support any of the factions.

The second example was Bolesław Piasecki, likewise an interwar ONR leader. Unlike Mosdorf, who died at Auschwitz, Piasecki survived the Second World War. A virulent anti-communist, after the war, when Poland became one of the Soviet Union's satellite states, he began cooperating with the new communist authorities, which allowed him to run a Catholic publishing house, to be controlled by the state. In explaining his decision, Janka echoed what many other ONR members would tell me: that is, that Piasecki's approach did not mean betraying his beliefs but rather making sure he could continue to profess them and that his plan was to «win over the winner», to try to attack the enemy from the inside. To emphasize the validity of this approach, she mentioned the interwar ONR militants who joined other (not necessarily nationalist or right-wing) organizations in order to – as she put it – «infect them with their activism».

Coherent incoherence, as exposed by Janka, is far from unique in radical nationalist milieus. I heard similar justifications from numerous activists in Poland, as well as in Italy and Hungary. They would emphasize that to be coherent does not mean that one never changes one's views; as a matter of fact, such a change may be considered proof of coherence.

Coherence is often invoked precisely when a person's situation and actions appear contradictory to an outside observer. For example, among the figures admired by far-right activists is Robert Brasillach, a French writer and a virulent antisemite who denounced Jews and never renounced his ideas. Conversely, Jan Mosdorf, cited by Janka, an ONR leader and likewise a virulent antisemite, was involved in helping Jewish prisoners while he was imprisoned in Auschwitz. Another example is the so-called «cursed soldiers» – members of the Polish underground army who, after the Second World War was over, did not lay down their arms, fighting the Soviet-backed Polish communist authorities. ONR activists praise them because they decided to die fighting rather than «sullying» themselves by cooperating. However, Bolesław Piasecki is praised not only by Janka but also by numerous other activists, and his choice to cooperate with the communist authorities is not judged in terms of «sullying». In short, regardless of whether these individuals' choices represent a continuity or a rupture in their beliefs, activists are likely to describe them in terms of personal or moral coherence.

Janka foregrounds the idea of «coherence» when discussing the relationship between politics and morality. To her – and to many other activists – concrete moral norms ought to permeate all spheres of social and political life. A politician cannot but express his views and act in accordance with his values; hence, for example, she finds the discussions on the abortion law nonsensical (how could a Catholic support a law which would make abortion legal?). Further, she argues that economic programs should be «filled with ethics». She maintains a strongly anti-capitalist, anti-free-market stand. Quoting an ONR ideologue (whose name she had forgotten) from the interwar era, she said, «Capitalism gives too little to live, but too much to die», thereby rending a *good life* impossible. «We need private property, but most branches of the economy should be state-owned and social welfare should be expanded». The conviction that ethics and economy need to be strongly intertwined was further reinforced by the readings in Catholic social thought. Generally, she beliefs that the principle of «national solidarism» should be the guiding one. Within ONR, she helps organize social actions for war combatants, orphans and other people in need. Even if these actions are often on a small scale (for example, in the city where she lives the ONR supports a dozen combatants), she emphasizes the importance of such actions for activists, especially the movement's new members, and for developing a compassionate attitude.

A deeply religious person, Janka supports the Society of Saint Pius X, the antimodernist fraternity of Catholic priests founded in 1970. The Society rejects the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, retaining the Tridentine Mass and use of Latin during sacraments. It emphasizes traditional gender roles, including modest dress code (especially for women). It is active in numerous countries, although its canonical situation remains unresolved. What Janka and other activists find inspiring in it is a critique of modernity, the Society's «uncompromising» attitude and emphasis on going back to the «roots». The emphasis on «roots» and «uncompromising attitude» are defining elements of «radicalness» in the activists' view. As she explained to me, the ONR's views on church-state relations and on hierarchy within the Church are basically identical to those represented by the pre-conciliar Church. Many people are fed up with what she calls «over-sweetened Catholicism» and looking for more discipline and a more demanding way of practicing religion. She also emphasized that the number of chapels run by the Society and the popularity of the traditional rite have been increasing.

«How would you explain this growth?» I asked, hoping she would expand on her critique of contemporary «easy religiosity». «I guess that's a question to God», she responded, smiling.

Forging a movement

After our meeting in Krakow in 2021, I remained «in touch» with Janka by reading the short articles that she regularly contributes to the ONR magazine, titled «Directions» (*Kierunki*). A graduate in history, she writes on a vast array on subjects, from problems with housing in Poland, through women fascists, to movie reviews. I last saw her in 2022, at the celebration of the ONR's anniversary, which is held every April and which tends to include a religious service, a ceremonial march, a series of speeches and a more informal part consisting of musical performances and socializing.

That year, the anniversary was organized in the city of Bydgoszcz, in northern Poland, and began with a Catholic mass. I arrived in Bydgoszcz by car from Warsaw, together with three other activists – one woman and two men. On the day of the event, I met with Ula (a female activist whom I had known for a while) in central Warsaw and we took the metro together to the house of the ONR member who was supposed to be taking us. When we arrived, he and another activist were busy carrying the boxes from his apartment. They spent a good deal of time loading the car with T-shirts bearing the movement's logo, publications and CDs featuring the music of «friendly» bands, while Ula and I continued catching up. The long time spent on packing as well as a series of mistakes on the road resulted in more than an hour's delay. One of the men, Wojtek, was very stressed about this, wondering if he would be «told off» by the national leaders and pondering on how to explain the delay. The fact that he occupies a relatively high position in the movement as a regional representative made him even more stressed: he is supposed to «set an example».

As always when I am presented to new activists, I was expected to say something about my work. My explanation of ethnographic methods and emphasis on «understanding» led my fellow travelers to tell me a story I had by then heard many times: of a journalist who had joined the movement for three months to gather material for an article and then disappeared. stressed how disappointing her behavior and the fact she lied about her intentions were. Apparently, they had tried to reach out to her to explain what happened. «I think she was afraid we would beat her up or something like that», Wojtek concluded, rolling his eyes when commenting on how absurd such a suspicion was.

During our journey, we talked about a variety of things, including the means of «formation» of new ONR members the leaders are trying to develop, such as lectures on nationalist thought on the YouTube channel organized by Janka. We spent a lot of time arguing about the legacy of fascism and Nazism. Whenever I opposed their claims and asked how we can speak about «honor» and «compassion» in the context of the Second World War crimes, I would hear an explanation that framed the choices and attitudes of the people discussed in terms of «coherence».

In the meantime, Wojtek got a call from the national leader, Miron, who inquired about our delay and shouted at him on the phone.

«How late did you come this morning?» Wojtek asked me and Ula, after finishing the call.

«We were on time», Ula said firmly, making it clear it was unthinkable to blame us for the delay.

«Right…», Wojtek admitted and grimaced.

Noting his distress, Ula changed the tone and said, as if to try to cheer him up: «We were just chatting and missed a turn or two, so we're all at fault».

But Wojtek went on: «I know, but I should've waited for you downstairs with all the packages ready. It's my fault… It's such an important event, once a year».

He kept talking, a bit to himself and a bit to us, wondering whether to risk getting into trouble and tell the truth, or to find an excuse.

We arrived in Bydgoszcz the moment the ceremonial church service ended, but we managed to attend a march with the movement's flags through the city center. The march seemed underprepared and regional leaders struggled to keep order, with a few activists getting lost on the way. A female activist walking next to me exclaimed, «How is it possible to get lost?! In the past people would be beaten up for something like that but the new leaders are so lenient» It was not the first time that I had heard about «de-skinization» of the movement and the fact that, rather than resorting to violence, the new leaders wanted to put an emphasis on education and «inculcation» of norms via teaching and conversations.

In the late afternoon, a few dozen ONR members gathered in a conference room, rented for the celebration of the movement's anniversary. Many of them wore sweatshirts with the date 1934 and green armbands, similar to those the interwar militants used to wear. They managed to cover the bare walls of the room with flags and banners, featuring slogans such as «Not numerous but fanatical» (*Choc nieliczni – fanatyczni*) and «You cannot delegalize the Idea» (*Idei nie zdelegalizujecie*).

The gathering occupied a few rows of chairs and listened in silence to the speeches. Several people took to the floor. An activist from the branch representing Bydgoszcz (where the event was held) spoke at length about the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic: «We realize the degree of social problems… I will never forget the smiles of kids from the orphanages… The importance of joint rosary prayers…» Another male activist talked about the vast networks of cooperators from abroad, listing the Italian and Hungarian movements and welcoming guests from the Spanish Bastion Nazional, with whom the ONR had just established cooperation. One of the board's members, Alina, picked up on this issue and described a new supranational initiative – a web platform where different nationalist movements publish. A literature graduate, she spoke in a very engaged and eloquent way about what the ONR means to her: «It is the people that I meet in this movement that give me such a motivation to act». A few other militants who took to the floor talked about political-economic issues, emphasizing the strength of the national radical alternative as neither left nor right, the necessity to fight against the liberal order and to counter the «economic domination of the "nation with hooked noses"». Nobody seemed surprised by this reference, as such rhetoric is a long-standing pattern in the movement's discourse, and, as mentioned earlier, tends to be related to financial elites and global institutions. That said, even if it was not the first time I had been exposed to it, I was once again struck by the ease with which activists moved between their account on charity work and hate speech.

Finally, Miron, the ONR leader, took to the floor. He described ten years in the movement as the best time of his life. He emphasized that he sees the ONR's strength in solidarity and camaraderie among the members, but also addressed weaknesses – first and foremost the laziness of many activists. «It is time to move your ass!» he exclaimed.

The event thus featured a bit of everything: references to the past and prewar ONR ideology, contemporary social and political problems, and ideas for a better future. All that was described in a language that blended data-backed economic analyzes with racist tropes, lofty vocabulary with swearwords. Xenophobic reminders about «enemies» dovetailed with expressions of solidarity towards «our own people» and, last but not least, testimonies of genuine friendship among members. The screening of a short film prepared for one of the activists to celebrate his long service illustrated that best. It featured diverse activities the ONR members pursued together – such as martial arts training, hiking trips, charity drives, lectures, joint celebrations of life events – painting a picture of the joy they bring to participants.

The final part of the event consisted of a ceremonial moment: the pledge by new members. I was sitting next to a young man who was supposed to make a pledge. When the master of ceremonies announced that it was time for this part of the program, my neighbor closed his eyes. I could see the veins pulsing on his forehead. He bowed his head and appeared to be praying in silence, waiting to be called on stage. But the ceremony was interrupted. An activist I had never met before (but who, as I heard later, was a prominent leader of one of the most numerous ONR chapters) took the microphone from the master of ceremonies and said, «I want you to think once again if you are *really* ready. I don't want you to call me in two months and say that you have changed your mind». He spoke firmly, yet in a slightly irritated voice. «Please take it to your hearts. Leaving the ONR means a betrayal [I saw my neighbor tightening when hearing the word 'betrayal']. In other words… be careful not to get me riled up», the speaker finished on a less solemn note.

After he had returned the microphone, new members' names were read and they were invited to come to the front. Three ONR board members came close, one of them holding a crucifix in his hand. A dozen new members repeated the words of pledge, promising faithfulness to the ONR and service to the nation. My neighbor closed his eyes when saying «So help me God». The board congratulated everyone profusely, while the master of ceremonies said, «This is not the end, this is just a beginning».

After the vows and speeches were over, the gathering moved to the adjacent room, where musical performances began and hot food was served. I spent the rest of the evening talking to various activists I knew from previous events: some of them garrulous and eager to update me on everything they were doing; some timid, like Janka, who, dressed in an elegant white blouse, sat in the corner and quietly observed what was going on. Towards the end of the event, after the music was over, ONR members gathered in one of the rooms to take a photo. Some of them shirtless and exposing a collection of tattoos, others proudly demonstrating the group logo on their T-shirts, they embraced each other and messed around. One of the branch leaders pushed me inside, stressing that as one of the event's attendees I «had to be» included. We went back and forth, me refusing to have my picture taken with the group, him getting angry and accusing me of being ashamed of being seen with the group, him grabbing my arm and me trying to leave the room. I stood my ground, realizing – not for the first time – that I had reached my limits of «being there»[8].

I was supposed to take a night train from Bydgoszcz and, having said farewell to several activists I knew well, I left the venue to wait for the people who had promised to give me a lift to the station. Outside the venue, I bumped into Miron, who said: «Pity you missed the mass this morning. I heard the reason you guys were late was because your train was delayed?»

Conclusions

Why did Wojtek lie? Was he simply afraid of Miron's anger, or too ashamed by the delay he had caused to tell the truth? Did he think that he had

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[8] See Sharma 2024 for an inspiring discussion on what «being there» may mean for an ethnographer.

to «set an example» and thus pretend it wasn't his fault? No matter what the reason was, I wonder if he was able to justify it as «coherent» with the behaviors and values he claimed to adhere to, and which he had professed several hours earlier in the car? And I also wonder: can we know this, even if we asked him directly why he did so? (I didn't).

In leaving this question – that of the limits of ethnographic insights into morality – open, I want to emphasize in what ways a study of such settings and milieus speaks to the issues at the heart of the anthropology of morality. The process of deciding whether to lie or not and the entire dynamics around it brings into the spotlight the question of competing systems of norms. Is it the value of sincerity and truth, the Catholic notion of the lie as a sin, the obligation to perform exemplarity for the sake of the movement, or «just» Wojtek's own ethical conviction at play here? Further, while the *choice* whether to tell the truth is an *individual* one, his reasoning demonstrates that thinking in terms of *constraint* and justifying choices in the name of *collective* values is likewise present, demonstrating all these notions to be contextual and entangled.

I proposed to examine these issues through the notion of coherence. In zooming in on various community moments, I emphasized the expectations of coherence, expressed in hierarchical relations: between leaders and new members/subordinates, or men and women. Performance of coherence is thus a boundary-making and cohesion-building tool, a message for the outside world («we are different») and for the movement itself. The latter point suggests that (the demand of) coherence is also a disciplinary tool. And it is also a deeply gendered one. As we have seen, maintaining coherence is a gender labor, with women such as Janka being responsible for moral education and upholding norms. As we recall, in Janka's account of a politician's decision not to celebrate Hanukkah there is now question of alternatives – she saw it as the only right thing to do – while Ula did not want to allow a lie to be told.

To an outside observer, the claims to coherence expressed by far-right activists may appear nonsensical and hypocritical. Indeed, far-right activists, politicians and supporters are often accused of double standards and cynicism, and their actions and decisions tend to be described in terms of «strategies» or «manipulation». It is hard not to see them this way when considering far-right discourses on, on the one hand, the «protection of all human lives [including the unborn]» and the «left-behind» and, on the other hand, the discriminatory rhetoric targeting refugees and all those «left-behind» who happen not to have the right passport. In this article, however, I strove to move beyond the moral assessment of such claims – using Fassin's vocabulary, to focus on morals instead of moralizing. I also sought to demonstrate that while ethnographic methodology enables us to observe how certain claims are put into action (or not), we can make sense of those claims – of their «coherent incoherence» – and actions only when referring them to the people's own processes of meaning-making.

The material I presented here suggests that what we external observers may see as contradiction, to the activists appears to be perfectly compatible, if not obvious. In other words, the coexistence of loving and hatred-filled claims is a contradiction to us but makes up a *coherent* narrative in the light of the broader far-right ideological framework. The same can be said about the coexistence of solemn vocabulary and crude jokes, respectful and threatening ways of talking, which, as we saw in the account on the ONR anniversary, nonetheless contribute to an experience of community and comradeship. And the same is true for individuals. Activists ought to be seen as assemblages of various experiences, declarations, and deeds, and their identity as ONR militants often needs to be reconciled with other roles, expectations, or systems of values. Moreover, questioning and querying the radical nationalist doctrine or the movement's norms is not uncommon within these movements; despite the emphasis on hierarchy and uniformity, they leave some space for disagreements and debates. In some cases, this may lead people to abandon the movement. In making such a choice, they may likewise evoke coherence, explaining that it is this the movement that changed the course or that fulfilling one's life duties and inspirations required them to leave the group.

«Coherent incoherence» – a tendency to hold multiple conflicting ethical beliefs and commitments at the same time – is, of course, a commonplace phenomenon, not limited to the milieus I am describing. The material I presented thus brings new insights to the discussion on conflicting value system and moral and ethical demands which has shaped the field (e.g., Robbins 2007; Zigon 2007). Apart from contributing to the anthropology of morality/ethics, a study of far-right «ethical communities», and in particular the focus on (desired, forged) personhood, may help us to better comprehend the popularity of such movements. In her fascinating account of the cult of a young Russian soldier who was killed after refusing to convert to Islam, Victoria Fomina (2018) demonstrates coherence to be the key to understanding his popularity among young

Russians. As Fomina notes, despite the diverse meanings that emerge in and around the soldier's cult, «the notion of moral personhood – a capacity to have values and stand by them until the end – emerges as the central object of ethical problematization». The appeal of such views was particularly pronounced in the postsocialist area, in «a context of a perceived spiritual holocaust, because they hold the promise of a new beginning and a moral revival of society» (Fomina 2018). This is an opinion my research participants would agree with too, talking about their «search for an alternative» and why they believe that they have found that alternative within the ONR.

By search for an alternative, they mean first and foremost an alternative to liberalism. Negligence of community is the strongest argument against liberalism which, as the activists emphasize, is a «suicidal ideology» as it «promotes a freedom from everything»: from common identities, from common responsibilities, from shared norms. In justifying their decision to form movements rather than parties, they emphasize that only a community of activists and a «communitarian spirit» guarantee a moral-ethical upbringing of a new generation («new men»). In promoting a view of community as a community of norms and values, the activists thus challenge the liberal idea of freedom, emphasizing that one is *truly* free in following the rules. This idea is strongly inspired by religion – not only traditional Catholic doctrine but the Eastern Orthodoxy that movements such as Codreanu's Legion of the Michael Archangel represent in their eyes.

In his poignant analysis of Codreanu's legionary movement, Eugen Weber (1966) emphasized that the role of such radical groups is to shake commonsensical notions and to disturb the notion of taken for granted. The success of Codreanu's movement lay not only in the «elan of romantic nationalism», but what was truly *revolutionary* there was the promotion of values such as honesty, punctuality and responsibility. In highlighting the clash of ideals with reality, Weber reversed the question of compromises and inconsistencies, instead taking them as *given*. The historian's approach corresponds here with anthropological knowledge. As Rita Astuti (2017) observed in her oft-quoted article on the value of ethnography, the fact that the things people say and do not necessarily «add up», and there are contradictions and inconsistencies, are also things to be taken seriously and to be examined. And so is, it would seem, *our own* tendency to look for and desire to find coherence in our research participants.

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Esperienze (stra)ordinarie e dilemmi etico-epistemologici alle Isole Marchesi

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Riassunto

L'articolo intende raccontare e problematizzare alcune personali esperienze etnografiche connesse alla manifestazione del cosiddetto "mondo dell'invisibile", che sono accadute durante il mio campo dottorale alle Isole Marchesi (Polinesia Francese). In particolare, mi riferisco qui ad accadimenti notturni di paralisi e strangolamento nel sonno che sono stati letti in relazione all'infrazione di luoghi tapu (tabù) e a causa di attacchi magici (nani kaha). Queste particolari circostanze hanno portato a dei conseguenti processi di guarigione con rimedi tradizionali e ad interrogarmi sul senso di concetti quali il mana o l'esistenza degli spiriti o degli antenati. Muovendo dalla letteratura sulle cosiddette esperienze (stra) ordinarie, questo scritto insiste però su come gli accadimenti e la loro interpretazione implichino processi di co-costruzione del significato, che presuppongono terreni di comprensione reciproca tra l'etnografo e i collaboratori nativi. Accaduti all'interno e in virtù dei legami costruiti con le famiglie che mi hanno ospitato sulle isole, simili avvenimenti (stra)ordinari sono stati tanto interpretati quanto presi in carico dalla guarigione locale proprio alla luce di dimensioni fortemente intersoggettive e di cornici morali condivise. Oltre a far emergere questi profondi piani esperienziali e discorsivi a livello etnografico, il presente scritto cerca di discutere quali dilemmi etici ed epistemologici ponga l'interpretazione delle cosmologie native, il posizionamento sul campo e tornando a casa e, infine, il senso di realtà connesso al mondo dell'invisibile in Polinesia Francese.

Parole chiave: esperienze (stra)ordinarie, *mana*, guarigione tradizionale, epistemologie native, realtà

Abstract

The article aims to recount and problematize some personal ethnographic experiences related to the manifestation of the so-called "world of the invisible" that happened during my *doctoral fieldwork in the Marquesas Islands (French Polynesia). In particular, I am referring here to nocturnal occurrences of paralysis and strangulation in sleep that locals read in connection with the breaking of tapu (taboo) places and due to magical attacks (nani kaha). These particular circumstances led to consequent healing processes with traditional remedies and to questions about the meaning of concepts such as mana and the existence of spirits or ancestors. Moving from the literature on so-called "(extra)ordinary experiences", however, this paper insists on how both these occurrences and their interpretation involve processes of co-construction of meaning, which presuppose terrains of mutual understanding between the ethnographer and indigenous collaborators. Taking place within and by virtue of the bonds built with my host families on the islands, such (extra)ordinary happenings were as much interpreted as taken over by local healers precisely in light of strongly intersubjective dimensions and shared moral frames. In addition to explore these deep experiential and discursive planes at the ethnographic level, the present paper seeks to discuss what ethical and epistemological dilemmas pose for the interpretation of native cosmologies, positioning oneself on the field and back home, and, finally, the sense of reality connected to the world of the invisible in French Polynesia.*

Keywords: (extra)ordinary experiences, *mana*, traditional healing, indigenous epistemologies, reality

Il presente articolo intende riflettere su particolari accadimenti – definiti in questa sede (stra)ordinari – che hanno contraddistinto la mia ricerca dottorale. In particolare, cercherò qui di ricostruire, problematizzare e interrogarmi su alcune esperienze etnografiche legate a circostanze oniriche e a guarigioni di cui ho fatto esperienza alle Isole Marchesi, un arcipelago della Polinesia Francese. Si tratta di eventi in cui il prefisso «extra» o «stra», messo in questo scritto fra parentesi, resta il frutto di una identificazione scivolosa e nondimeno controversa. Malgrado l'esistenza di un filone nord-americano che tra la fine degli anni Ottanta e gli inizi degli anni Novanta aveva attribuito a questi fenomeni vissuti dal ricercatore un rilevante statuto epistemologico (Young e Goulet 1998; Fabian 2001; Goulet & Miller 2007), la definizione di eccezionalità se non completamente rigettata viene qui accolta con perplessità almeno per due fattori. Per un verso, in questa corrente tale dicitura è per lo più un'espressione delle categorie dell'antropologo piuttosto che della comunità nativa di riferimento e, per un altro, lo straordinario rimane poco capace di cogliere in seno a tale comunità le porosità di visioni e posizionamenti indigeni rispetto a tali circostanze. Come vedremo, nonostante l'esistenza di tempi e luoghi in cui si manifestano spiriti, antenati o entità non umane sia in qualche modo identificabile e rimandi a circostanze di fatto fuori dall'ordinario, l'eccezionalità resta una questione dibattuta e tutt'altro che condivisa. Da qui l'esigenza di dar conto di tali fenomeni con l'uso più cauto delle parentesi.

Fatta questa doverosa premessa, nelle pagine che seguono tenterò di porre la letteratura che ha analizzato negli ultimi decenni questi temi in relazione a un più ampio dibattito antropologico che ha progressivamente conferito importanza alle dimensioni morali e intersoggettive della ricerca. L'intento è quello di non limitare la riflessione sulle esperienze (stra)ordinarie alla contrapposizione tra approcci interpretativi (Geertz 1986) ed esperienziali (Turner 1985), ma rileggerle alla luce di un più sfaccettato quadro di posizionamenti sul campo e di nuove sfumature della discussione teorica. Mettendo al centro i collaboratori come parte attiva e costitutiva della costruzione del significato, questa prima sezione intende infine introdurre quelle dimensioni soggettive o incorporate che affronterò poi nel merito della mia etnografia. Da qui passerò a tracciare alcune coordinate contestuali relative alla storia culturale degli ultimi decenni alle Isole Marchesi al fine di problematizzare come siano state risemantizzate di recente le esperienze a contatto con gli spiriti/antenati o con il *mana.* Essendo simili manifestazioni appartenenti al cosiddetto «mondo dell'invisibile» spesso palesate in tempi (la notte) e in luoghi (la foresta) «altri» rispetto a quelli ordinari della quotidianità e circondati anche da un immaginario e da una casistica ricorrente, tali elementi contestuali sono la doverosa premessa per capire ciò di cui sono stato testimone. A questo punto introdurrò le mie vicissitudini sul terreno che, protrattosi per circa diciotto mesi in Polinesia Francese (marzo 2021-agosto 2022), si è articolato in periodi alterni tra Tahiti e le Marchesi, dove con tempi più o meno lunghi ho trascorso circa un anno sulle sei isole abitate dell'arcipelago. Il racconto degli episodi di paralisi e strangolamento nel sonno di cui ho fatto esperienza si soffermerà solo in parte sui contesti isolani poiché l'intento è svelare come tali accadimenti si siano dati all'interno di situazioni familiari precise.

Con ciò intendo precisare che, proprio in virtù di alcuni legami forti costruiti assieme alle famiglie che mi hanno ospitato e accolto sulle isole, gli avvenimenti (stra)ordinari sono stati in qualche modo associati ad una fenomenologia locale e sono stati egualmente presi in carico dalla guarigione. In altre parole, le relazioni intersoggettive e le cornici morali emerse all'interno di questi scenari di vita quotidiana segnati da grande condivisione sono stati alla base tanto dell'esperienza e della sua concettualizzazione quanto dei processi di cura, affidati a specialisti provenienti dalle famiglie stesse. Pertanto la mia disponibilità a prendere in carico le spiegazioni degli eventi e di affidare il mio corpo ai rimedi della farmacopea e della terapia nativa s'inscrivono in una sfera d'intimità molto forte che può qui definirsi in senso ampio «etica» o «morale». Simili connotati d'altro canto definiscono anche i dilemmi legati all'interpretazione di questi accadimenti, che inevitabilmente implica uno scarto tra il piano discorsivo ed esperienziale degli 'Enana e le categorie o gli assunti del dibattito scientifico. In ultima istanza, proverò a tal proposito a enucleare alcuni aspetti problematici che mi pone direttamene l'esperienza etnografica rispetto alle visioni del mondo native, al mio posizionamento sul campo e una volta tornato a casa, e al senso di realtà che chiama in causa, ad esempio, un concetto come il *mana* o la manifestazione di quelli che sono creduti gli spiriti o gli antenati.

Corpo, riflessività ed esperienze (stra)ordinarie

La riflessione sulle esperienze (stra)ordinarie e sui dilemmi morali ed epistemologici legati ad una loro sistematica comprensione è stata al centro di alcuni scritti che hanno cercato in vario modo di ripercorrere, tematizzare, discutere la letteratura di tali episodi (Young & Goulet 1998; Dei 1996; Fabian 2001; Goulet & Miller 2007; Aria 2008). A fronte di queste sintesi, resta indubbio che una diversa percezione dell'importanza in senso euristico di una serie di avvenimenti spesso annoverati tra le manifestazioni estatiche, epifaniche, mistiche sia maturata in parallelo ad una nuova consapevolezza sull'intersoggettività della ricerca e sul ruolo della partecipazione del ricercatore. In breve, interessando quelle dimensioni «etiche» o «morali» che legano inestricabilmente quest'ultimo ai soggetti della propria indagine conoscitiva. Esse furono per la prima volta annoverate nella pratica di ricerca quando venne discusso un presunto codice deontologico della disciplina antropologica. Intesa come professione impegnata nello studio della diversità culturale, l'antropologia dagli anni Sessanta in poi ha visto il diffondersi di una serie di «buone» prassi e comportamenti considerati «virtuosi» o «etici» nel rapporto con gli interlocutori.

> Progressivamente gli attori sociali cominciarono a divenire «soggetti», da trattare con straordinarie cautele; soggetti coinvolti direttamente nella costruzione del processo conoscitivo [...] la diffusione di prospettive teorico-metodologiche che privilegiavano l'analisi (anzi spesso la «auto-analisi») del ricercatore come soggetto carico di sentimenti, scelte, interessi, intenzioni, pre-cognizioni, arricchiva le cautele, la fissazione di limiti e di sistemi di controllo, sulla ricerca (Colajanni 2016: 175).

Al di là di statuti, convenzioni e approcci istituzionali, queste sfere costitutive del sapere antropologico vennero tematizzate soprattutto all'interno dei filoni interpretativo e poi riflessivo, che hanno con forza proposto analisi sulla soggettività di chi fa ricerca e sulla relazione maturata con coloro che prendono attivamente parte ad essa. Al contempo, simili approcci sono stati fondamentali per ripensare quegli episodi poco ordinari che fino ad allora erano stati motivo di imbarazzo o di vergogna per gli etnografi, contribuendo da allora in poi ad includerli nel dibattito nonché a prenderli sempre più «sul serio» (Maclancy 2002; Astuti 2017). In altre parole, «capovolgendo le impostazioni classiche e concedendo agli aspetti autobiografici della ricerca sul campo un ruolo fondamentale nella costruzione del sapere etnografico, hanno offerto agli studi sulle esperienze straordinarie nuove possibilità teoriche e metodologiche» (Aria 2008: 71).

Simili possibilità muovono, dunque, per un verso dal proverbiale approccio distanziante dell'antropologia interpretativa (Geertz 1973) e, per un altro, dalla metafora testuale dei sostenitori degli indirizzi dialogici (Rabinow 1977; Crapanzano 1980; Dwyer 1982) e, più in generale, dal decostruzionismo centrato sulla rappresentazione inaugurato da *Writing culture* in poi (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Marcus & Fisher 1986; Clifford 1988). La critica a queste posture negli anni Novanta è avvenuta, tra gli altri, dai sostenitori dell'incorporazione; un approccio che rifiuta di assumere il corpo in quanto supporto in cui viene inscritta l'esperienza culturale e lo ripensa in quanto soggetto dotato di un'agency capace di giocare un ruolo cruciale nella relazione tra l'etnografo e i suoi collaboratori.

Se l'antropologia dialogica aveva cercato di promuovere forme inclusive degli attori sociali ricorrendo prevalentemente a espedienti letterari, il paradigma dell'incorporazione ha avuto il merito di aggiungere in modo complementare alla rappresentazione la sfera della soggettività e dell'esperienza in senso tipicamente fenomenologico[1]. Diversamente da Mar-

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[1] Thomas J. Csordas, uno dei principali esponenti di questo indirizzo, è convinto che per non ridurre l'esperienza ad una questione linguistica, indagabile attraverso fredde analisi ermeneutiche o semiotiche, fosse necessario recuperare le nozioni esistenzialiste di Heidegger e della tradizione fenomenologica, soprattutto con Merleau-Ponty. Quest'ultimo aveva enfatizzato l'importanza della percezione per comprendere il mondo e sottolineato quella del corpo come soggetto e non oggetto della conoscenza. In breve, discostandosi dal concepire il corpo come supporto su cui s'inscrivono i segni della cultura, come avevano sostenuto, tra gli altri, sia Mauss (1965) che Bourdieu

cel Mauss (1965) che nel suo noto testo sulle «tecniche del corpo» aveva individuato una serie di modi con cui gli uomini danno forma ai propri retroterra culturali attraverso gesti, posture, tecniche corporee, il termine *embodiment* (incorporazione) designa invece un nuovo campo metodologico in cui il corpo diventa «il soggetto della cultura stessa, vale a dire il terreno esistenziale della cultura» (Csordas 1990: 5).

Tale concetto sposta il focus da un'antropologia tesa ad indagare pratiche, segni e comportamenti culturali del corpo ad una che «dal corpo» ripensa un approccio investigativo, chiamando sempre più in causa l'esperienza fisica e partecipativa del soggetto nel tentativo di comprendere il mondo. Pur contestando dunque l'approccio semiotico di Geertz e la sua preminenza per gli aspetti linguistici ed ermeneutici mutuati da Wittgenstein e Ricoeur, Csordas ritiene che l'impianto fenomenologico può coesistere accanto a quello geertziano o agli esperimenti postmoderni della scrittura etnografica. Secondo Csordas, la rappresentazione e l'essere-nel-mondo in senso fenomenologico devono «stare accanto» come «partner dialogici» (Csordas 2003: 23). A suo avviso, infatti, la riflessività sta alla rappresentazione a livello ermeneutico e semiotico tanto quanto quella che chiama «riflettività» sta all'incorporazione su un piano esistenzialista e fenomenologico: entrambi sono approcci complementari e necessari all'impresa etnografica.

«L'antropologia dal corpo estende la portata della riflessività dalla negoziazione dei significati alla fenomenologia dell'incontro sul campo» (Malighetti & Molinari 2016: 193) e nel far ciò si avvicina a quel filone incentrato sulla performance che Victor Turner aveva in qualche modo inaugurato prendendo le distanze dall'approccio interpretativo. Una contrapposizione sostanziata poi con la pubblicazione nel 1986 di *The Anthropology of Experience*, che Turner aveva curato assieme a E.M. Burner. In questo testo i modi d'intendere la ricerca etnografica si sono polarizzati attorno ad un approccio fondamentalmente distanziate e anti-empatico (Geertz 1986) e uno fondato sulla partecipazione intersoggettiva (Turner 1986), vicino ad alcune tesi riprese anche dai sostenitori dell'incorporazione.

Geertz difende qui un atteggiamento etnografico che invita a interpretare mantenendo una distanza col punto di vista del nativo, ossia rinunciando ad empatizzare con la prospettiva dei soggetti o a letteralmente

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(1972). Per dirla con Csordas (2003: 24) «se la semiotica ci fornisce la testualità per comprendere le rappresentazioni, la fenomenologia ci fornisce l'incorporazione per comprendere l'essere-nel-mondo».

tentare di «mettersi nella loro pelle». Occorre, a suo avviso, «restare nascosti ai margini del bosco per osservare ciò che accade» (Geertz 2005: 13-14), cioè interpretando senza condizionamenti o suggestioni mistiche l'esperienza degli attori o la vita sociale (Geertz 1986). Turner, per contro, sposta il focus investigativo dai discorsi alle pratiche e in termini metodologici è convinto che si debba passare dall'osservazione all'esperienza emotiva e corporea. Credendo fortemente che la comprensione si fondi sul calarsi in modo diretto e partecipativo, Turner invita l'etnografo a tentare di sospendere il giudizio per fare esperienza di una realtà altra da cogliere principalmente mediante la performance, ossia un coinvolgimento radicale nella pratica indagata. Un punto questo anticipato in un articolo dal titolo *Experience and Performance. Towards a New Processual Anthropology* apparso in una raccolta di saggi (Turner 1985) che marcava l'interesse per gli aspetti esperienziali, guardando con interesse alla filosofia di Wilhem Dilthey[2]. In particolare, grande attenzione veniva riservata ai concetti coniati da quest'ultimo come

> «vita» (*Leben*) ed «esperienza» (*erleben*, letteralmente «vivere attraverso»), con i quali Dilthey ambiva a creare la base epistemologica e metodologica per una scienza umanistica dell'individuo e del dominio socioculturale intersoggettivo (Turner 1985: 210).

Adottando l'assunto di Dilthey per cui la comprensione (*Verstehen*) avviene attraverso le esperienze vissute, Turner giunge infine ad affermare che «l'esperienza deve essere collegata alla performance perché ci sia trasformazione. Il significato è generato nel processo trasformativo come suo frutto principale» (Turner 1985: 206).

I testi postumi di Turner hanno inoltre contribuito a dare maggior risalto alla sfera intersoggettiva dell'esperienza etnografica, aprendo nuovi

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[2] Per Dilthey la possibilità di comprendere le altrui mentalità si basa in primis sull'assunto che il genere umano sia accomunato dall'unità psicologica (le cui differenze sono da leggersi in termini di grado, non di tipo) e, in secondo luogo, che le componenti mentali siano legate alle loro espressioni culturali, cioè le manifestazioni attraverso cui individui e gruppi si differenziano. A suo avviso ciascun individuo sente e pensa immediatamente, «vivendo attraverso» (*erleben*) i propri sentimenti emotivi e i propri pensieri, organizzati in vere e proprie «strutture dell'esperienza». «Un Erlebnis si distingue da un altro in quanto ha una funzione specifica in relazione alla vita di un individuo o di un gruppo nel suo complesso – ogni esperienza è una parte di un tutto» (*Ivi*: 212).

orizzonti nel dibattito antropologico anche su episodi o fenomeni della ricerca che sono direttamente legati alle modalità di partecipazione del ricercatore. Si tratta di avvenimenti che a lungo sono stati considerati delle «credenze superstiziose della mente» (Stoller & Olkes 1987) oppure delle finzioni letterarie simili a quelle di Carlos Castaneda che, data la loro natura fortemente soggettiva, invitano a «credere» piuttosto che a «confutare» o a cercare di «comprendere» analiticamente dei dati scientifici. In breve, sono tesi e posture animate dal desiderio di Castaneda di dar conto dell'esperienza psichedelica dall'interno, ambendo utopisticamente ad abbandonare le categorie di partenza dello studioso con la pretesa di «diventare» o «farsi» nativo. Come notava provocatoriamente però già Roy Wagner

> «diventare indigeno» è altrettanto infruttuoso, dal punto di vista del lavoro sul campo, che stare all'aeroporto o in albergo a inventare storie sugli indigeni: in nessuno dei due casi vi è alcuna possibilità di collegare (e di inventare) in modo significativo le culture (1992: 23).

A fronte dello scetticismo per la potenziale deriva contro-culturale generata dall'effetto Castaneda (Dei 1996: 357) e delle «possibilità teoriche e metodologiche» offerte al ricercatore dopo la svolta riflessiva e dialogica (Aria 2008: 71), una gamma di esperienze non ordinarie (almeno per gli etnografi) finiscono al centro di una rinnovata riflessione. Quest'ultima comincia a interrogarsi sulle forme di comprensione della realtà esperite in circostanze particolari sia dai nativi che dagli accademici.

Per i protagonisti di questo filone denominato *Experiential Approach* (o antropologia dell'esperienza straordinaria) – sorto fra gli anni Ottanta e i primi anni Novanta soprattutto nel dibattito antropologico nordamericano (*Ivi*: 75) – è quindi dirimente porsi il problema della comprensione di esperienze mistiche, oniriche e di carattere (extra)ordinario. Esse inevitabilmente finiscono però per chiamare in causa come interagiamo con i nostri interlocutori e, di conseguenza, anche l'«osservazione della partecipazione» (Tedlock 1991). In scia alle riflessioni di Tedlock (1991), l'approccio di questi studiosi esalta il dialogo e l'incontro etnografico come momenti in cui scaturiscono le esperienze e si generano i dati, seppur facendo un salto ulteriore. Cioè pensando che il ricercatore debba aprirsi per poi lasciarsi trasportare dalle iniziative culturali altrui e dai concetti «vicini» alla loro esperienza. Così sogni, visioni, episodi estatici riportati dagli etnografi sul campo

> ci fanno scattare in una nuova consapevolezza, perché derivano da esperienze vissute che mettono in discussione le nostre convenzioni e i nostri presupposti di vita. I buoni resoconti etnografici evocano un ambito dell'esperienza umana e nel processo gettano le basi per la sua spiegazione all'interno dell'antropologia (Goulet 1998: 20-21).

Gli etnologi che insistono sulle «esperienze straordinarie» (Young & Goulet 1998; Fabian 2001; Goulet & Miller 2007) cercano di pararsi dalle accuse di essere troppo narcisisti o autoreferenziali ma allo stesso tempo non intendono con ciò condividere l'obiettività scientifica o la postura puramente osservativa tipica dell'approccio di Geertz. Quest'ultimo diventa semmai il bersaglio della loro critica proprio per il suo prediligere una distanza priva di un sostanziale coinvolgimento con i processi o con gli attori dell'indagine etnografica. Viceversa, per Goulet e Miller (2007: 8) questi ultimi sono parte di un'esperienza non solo conoscitiva ma anche formativa, nel senso della trasformazione che può indurre nel ricercatore stesso attraverso il confronto epistemologico e culturale con l'alterità. Quindi in questo senso l'allargamento degli orizzonti storiografici nel circolo ermeneutico scaturito dall'esperienza diretta o dalla partecipazione radicale provoca non solo una messa in discussione delle prospettive di ognuno ma diventa, per l'etnografo, occasione per conoscere e per cambiare (Goulet & Miller 2007; Aria 2008: 80-81).

In che cosa avviene allora questa trasformazione? Su quali basi deve/può avvenire un allargamento del nostro orizzonte conoscitivo o esistenziale? Una simile acquisizione presuppone necessariamente di fare esperienza di una realtà radicalmente altra oppure esistono oggi terreni intermedi di comprensione reciproca fra «noi» e «loro»?

Cercherò di rispondere a simili interrogativi dando spazio adesso al racconto degli episodi «eccezionali» che sono stati al centro della mia etnografia e degli aspetti generativi scaturiti per aver condiviso questi fatti con alcuni dei miei interlocutori. Riflettendo poi sulle dimensioni euristiche connesse all'esperienza in sé e al suo racconto, proverò infine a individuare alcuni ordini del discorso che chiamano in causa i dilemmi morali ed epistemologici che tornando a casa tutt'ora mi interrogano. In ultima istanza, concluderò avventurandomi in una breve e sintetica discussione sul tipo di realtà che simili accadimenti propongono, tanto ai Marchesiani quanto al sottoscritto, che deve adesso provare a darne conto con concetti «lontani» dall'esperienza, o almeno negoziare terreni intermedi fra le proprie categorie e quelle dei propri interlocutori.

Luoghi e tempi dell'incontro con l'invisibile alle Marchesi

Le esperienze di paralisi nel sonno, ripetutesi più volte durante i soggiorni alle Marchesi, sono episodi nel mio caso forse non così iniziatici per il percorso di ricerca come sono state le conseguenze innescate dal «camminare sul *marae*» di cui è stato protagonista Matteo Aria alle Isole della Società[3]. Inutile, tuttavia, negare che questi precedenti hanno rappresentato per me parte dell'immaginario locale nonché del filtro antropologico con il quale mi approcciavo nel 2021 ai mitici Mari del Sud. I miei interessi di ricerca erano rivolti non tanto a questi fenomeni quanto piuttosto ai fermenti revivalistici che da qualche decennio sono al centro del sentimento identitario in Polinesia Francese. In scia alle pregresse ricerche dottorali di Aria sul «rinascimento *mā'ohi*» alle Isole della Società, mi premeva investigare come il quadro della valorizzazione artistica e culturale fosse andato declinandosi ai «margini» o nelle «periferie» del Territorio polinesiano, come vengono percepite le Marchesi nel sistema centralizzato costruito da Tahiti dal dopoguerra in poi (Bailleul 1999; Saura 2008; Merceron & Morschel 2013).

Il sentimento di orgoglio identitario è maturato a seguito di un periodo compreso tra la seconda metà dell'Ottocento e la prima metà del Novecento sovente raffigurato con l'immagine dell'ecatombe demografica e della perdita della memoria. Ad accrescere però il senso di dimenticanza dei locali è stato per molto tempo anche un taglio letterario o indagini etnografiche interessate a porre in risalto elementi tradizionali identificati nel passato, lamentando così un presente che ne era dimentico. Le immagini romantiche dei *paepae* (basamenti litici a scopo abitativo) dipinti come «pietre mute» dalla penna di Jack London (1913: 131) o i celebri «senza memoria» compianti da Victor Segalen (1907) si saldarono a espressioni di celebri antropologi. Di ciò ne sono esempi il «vuoto culturale» menzionato da Bengt Danielsson nei primi decenni del Novecento (Danielsson 1965: 246) oppure la nota immagine del «silenzio» impiegata da Greg Dening

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[3] Matteo Aria aveva per la prima volta approcciato i suoi contesti di ricerca polinesiani e, in particolare l'isola di Ra'iātea, facendo esperienza di un episodio eccezionale che in qualche modo è stato l'incipit di un interessamento conoscitivo più ampio e la «testa di ponte» che gli ha permesso egualmente di entrare in intimi rapporti con alcuni dei suoi interlocutori. In sintesi, è stato l'aver incautamente camminato sul *marae* di Taputapuatea, a Ra'iātea, allora in uno stato di incuria e dal 2017 divenuto patrimonio culturale UNESCO, ad aver provocato uno stato confusionale e delle esperienze allucinatorie che gli hanno permesso, tuttavia, di aprire fondamentali spazi tanto relazionali quanto euristici (Aria 2008).

per descrivere, ancora agli inizi degli anni Settanta, delle isole che gli apparivano come «una terra cupa e taciturna» (Dening 1980: 290).

Alcuni processi di incremento demografico, di miglioramento delle condizioni educative, economiche e sociali consentirono dagli anni Ottanta in poi alle élites intellettuali native di elaborare, sull'onda anche di quanto avveniva a Tahiti e nel resto del Pacifico, un diverso atteggiamento nei confronti del proprio retroterra culturale, esaltandolo in contrapposizione a quello tahitiano e rendendolo compatibile con quello metropolitano. Così l'associazione culturale Motu Haka e paradossalmente la figura centrale di un vescovo, Hérve Le Cléac'h (1972-1986), contribuirono a coniugare l'orgoglio identitario del revival con i valori cattolici da un lato e repubblicani dall'altro. Gradualmente questo processo ha permesso agli 'Enana di consapevolizzare la presenza di un idioma, di una cultura e di una storia condivise tra le diverse isole ma distinte rispetto a quelle metropolitane e agli altri arcipelaghi dell'Oceania. La diffusa narrazione centrata sull'oblio è stata oggetto di una critica da parte degli stessi Marchesiani e sovvertita definitivamente quando il bisogno di (ri)scoprire, valorizzare o dare voce alle tradizioni è andato strutturandosi di pari passo all'edificazione del sentimento di unità comune a livello arcipelagico e «arcipe-logico» (Favole 2020). Su un piano istituzionale e simbolico la celebrazione di questa unione è avvenuta adottando una serie di elementi tipici del sentimento nazionale, modellati prevalentemente in relazione alla Métropole. La bandiera, l'inno, un istituto di difesa e promozione della lingua (Accademia marchesiana) o le pratiche di restauro archeologico e di valorizzazione del patrimonio sono sintomatici dei modelli culturali utilizzati dalle autorità politiche e intellettuali native per legittimare le proprie iniziative e per distinguersi in termini istituzionali dall'egemonia delle mode, dei format e dei canali tahitiani. Nella scena artistica locale questa volontà di ritagliarsi uno spazio di espressione e di condivisione è andato strutturandosi dalla fine degli anni Ottanta con la creazione del Matava'a o te Henua 'Enana (il Festival delle Arti delle Isole Marchesi). Oggi esso si tiene a rotazione ogni due anni su una delle sei isole abitate dell'arcipelago e rappresenta il momento ritualizzato di maggior partecipazione per esibire gli elementi della tradizione *'enana*. In senso politico, è soprattutto con la fondazione della Comunità dei Comuni delle Isole Marchesi (CODIM) nel 2011 che l'arcipelago ha cominciato a rafforzare i legami con la Francia al fine di indebolire la voce dominante di Tahiti nel Territorio. Così oggi vari progetti ecologici, turistici e infrastrutturali promossi dalla CODIM devono essere intesi nel continuo tentativo degli ‘Enana di muoversi all’interno di quadri giuridici e politici più ampi, cercando di giocare creativamente l’essere in periferia per sovvertire la subalternità dell’arcipelago rispetto al centro del Territorio, ossia Tahiti.

Era all’interno di un simile scenario che muovevo i primi passi di una ricerca che, al di là di qualche contatto con i membri dell’Accademia marchesiana, non aveva inizialmente un itinerario già tracciato. Il mio approdo a Nuku Hiva era avvenuto grazie all’incontro inaspettato con Kaioi, una ragazza di appena vent’anni con cui avevo condiviso la quarantena nell’hotel covid-19, a Tahiti, non appena avevo messo piede in Polinesia Francese. Kaioi mi aveva infatti gentilmente garantito un primo provvisorio alloggio a casa della madre, nella valle Pakiu di Taioha’e. Qui quest’ultima, Vehine Otomimi, si era risposata con Gustave Fanaura, e ormai abitava assieme ai due figli: Autea, un bambino di otto anni e la più piccola Hakahia di tre. Dopo qualche momento iniziale di assestamento, questo riparo temporaneo è diventato sempre più per me un contesto familiare in cui sono stato coinvolto in storie, dinamiche e relazioni familiari, dal momento che la casa era sempre frequentata dai genitori, dai fratelli, dai cugini di Vehine così come da altri membri del suo gruppo parentale.

Punto di svolta nella mia accettazione è stata però la decisione di diventare il padrino di Hakahia quando Gustave mi aveva chiesto di presenziare al suo battesimo tre settimane dopo il mio arrivo. Questo legame simbolico e affettivo ha permesso di superare alcune difficoltà iniziali d’integrazione e mi ha consentito di poter contare sul supporto della rete parentale sia per ricerche a Nuku Hiva che in occasione dei miei soggiorni sulle altre isole. In termini morali ciò è corrisposto al coinvolgimento in una serie di pratiche legate alla sfera domestica (dalla cura dei bambini alle battute di pesca, dalla preparazione dei cibi al gossip sulla vita locale) e al rispetto di quelle regole informali che scandiscono la quotidianità o l’ordinario dei miei interlocutori. Al contempo, nei cinque mesi in cui sono stato stato a casa Fanaura-Otomimi ho avuto modo di accedere a contenuti molto profondi dell’esperienza culturale locale, che l’intimità della mia nuova condizione di «padrino» mi ha consentito in qualche modo di penetrare ed esperire. Assieme quindi a piccoli doveri, obblighi morali e al groviglio di situazioni familiari che tale posizionamento mi ha imposto come «membro occasionale della rete sociale locale» (Colajanni 2010: 87), diventare padrino di Hakahia è stato di fondamentale importanza per disvelare certi ambiti sovente associati al segreto o al non-detto.

In particolare, fare diretta esperienza del *mana*, cioè della forza ancestrale che ancora è ritenuta contraddistinguere determinati spazi e tempi della vita locale, e delle conseguenze legate all'infrazione di un luogo creduto pervaso da questa energia. Un fatto che viene associato alla manifestazione, in circostanze assai poco ordinarie, del cosiddetto mondo dell'invisibile e delle sue presenze spirituali. Nella convinzione di molti e, al latere di una pervasiva diffusione della fede cattolica, oggi il *mana* continua ad essere considerato parte dei discorsi e delle pratiche che vengono in vario modo ricondotte alla sfera della guarigione tradizionale. Malgrado le derive pop, New Age e commerciali con cui spesso il *mana* è venuto a intrecciarsi o in cui è stato assorbito (Tomlinson & Tengan 2016), le sue manifestazioni in una sfera intima presentano precisi referenti spaziali e temporali nei racconti e nelle esperienze dei suoi testimoni diretti. In passato, nei gruppi sociali *ʻenana* questa energia impersonale circolava secondo regole e sistemi rituali (i *tapu*), legittimando alcune categorie sociali e garantendo l'esercizio di facoltà e obblighi sulla base di un prestigio riconosciuto collettivamente[4]. Nell'ordine cosmologico tradizionale indigeno il fine ultimo del sistema dei *tapu* era quello di evitare un pericoloso sbilanciamento delle relazioni che regolavano il mondo visibile e il tempo diurno dei viventi (*ao*) con quello invisibile e notturno degli spiriti (*po*). Pertanto, una disordinata circolazione del *mana* dovuta all'infrazione dei *tapu* portava ad una contaminazione e all'impurità di oggetti, luoghi, persone, causando conseguenze come incidenti, punizioni oppure ripercuotendosi sullo stato di salute/malattia dei responsabili della trasgressione.

Con la cristianizzazione e le trasformazioni politiche, economiche e culturali delle società *ʻenana*, la risemantizzazione di una serie di concetti legati all'epistemologie e alle credenze locali ha, per un verso, reciso il

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[4] La divisione tra ciò che è sacro (*tapu*) da ciò che non lo è (*me'ie*) presente nella società marchesiana prima dell'avvento della colonizzazione e del cristianesimo era da leggersi in relazione alla fondamentale distinzione cosmologica tra un mondo della luce e dei vivi (*ao*) e uno dei morti e degli spiriti (*po*). Non si trattava di una divisione soltanto tra un tempo originario e oscuro della creazione da cui derivavano gli antenati e a cui ritornavano i morti (*po*) e un tempo successivo del giorno e della luce in cui avveniva la vita (*ao*), dal momento che queste due dimensioni erano in relazione e vi era un passaggio continuo dall'una all'altra. «La divisione non era strettamente temporale, poiché, in un altro senso, *po* coesisteva con *ao*: praticamente tutto ciò che accadeva in questo mondo era visto come conseguente alle attività di agenti ultraterreni» (Thomas 1990: 66)

continuum relazionale tra umani e non-umani e, per un altro, svuotato di senso e conferito nuovi significati alle esperienze indigene. Ad esempio, a causa di simili processi il *mana* è stato nel tempo identificato come un potere occulto di natura demoniaca verso cui provare timore, mentre il *tapu* si è trasformato sempre più in un divieto generalizzato nell'entrare in contatto con simboli e tracce materiali del passato tradizionale. Pertanto, le manifestazioni legate a questa sfera dell'invisibile possono essere rintracciabili in quegli spazi e in quei tempi che l'evangelizzazione non è riuscita a estirpare, convertire, addomesticare. Dalla maggior parte delle testimonianze raccolte sul campo e sulla base delle mie esperienze in prima persona, emerge che il *mana* e la presenza di spiriti/antenati legati al mondo dell'invisibile si rinvengono in uno luogo (la foresta con le sue rovine) e in un tempo (la notte) precisi della vita quotidiana. È curioso notare che essi siano in una linea di continuità rispetto alle credenze sopra menzionate e che interessino delle dimensioni spaziali e temporali che sono in qualche modo sfuggite alla cristianizzazione, rimanendo confinate in fruizioni locali di tipo comunitario o familiare, quindi non pubblico, e in registri regolati dall'indicibilità.

La foresta si configura non solo come il paesaggio culturale della perdita e dell'oblio ma anche il rifugio naturale per tutelare le vestigia del passato, adottando tattiche di «abbandono volontario» che ne impediscono l'accesso, la conoscenza o la spoliazione. Mediante atteggiamenti basati sul non dire, sul secretare e sull'occultare in modo deliberato, certi attori locali impediscono che determinati luoghi, oggetti o resti umani siano di fatto rinvenuti. Ciò consente sia di evitare depredazioni al patrimonio ma anche di impedire che esso sia conservato secondo logiche centrate sul restauro architettonico e sulla visibilità turistica, di cui sono stati promotori sia gli archeologi occidentali sia spesso alcuni rappresentati politici e culturali nativi, che hanno assorbito le loro logiche e pratiche. Inoltre, in modo simile ad altri contesti oceaniani, la selva si configura come rifugio sia per contestare certe versioni ufficiali della storia orale (Gallo 2022), sia per esprimere quei tratti identitari avvertiti in continuità con gli antenati e praticati dai giovani andando a fare la copra, le battute di caccia, coltivando la terra (*fa'a'apu*) e così via (Lattanzi 2020). Come vedremo a breve, tuttavia, la foresta e l'incolto rimangono luoghi anche di accesso o di contatto con l'invisibile, a prescindere dai registri generazionali o culturali con cui le sue manifestazioni vengono palesate da chi ci entra in contatto.

Tiki, paralisi notturne e guarigioni sulle isole

L'episodio (stra)ordinario che mi ha riguardato è accaduto durante una delle prime escursioni che cominciai a fare sull'isola di Nuku Hiva per visitare alcuni luoghi d'interesse culturale e archeologico. Durante le mie ricerche ero infatti interessato a raccogliere storie, aneddoti e tradizioni orali legate ai siti soprattutto delle valli di Hatiheu e di Taipivai, dove si erano concentrati i restauri e anche una discreta quantità di documentazione storica. Avendo conosciuto le figlie di Pierre Teikitohe durante i primi mesi a Tahiti e poi a Nuku Hiva, accettai il suo invito a soggiornare nella sua casa di Taipivai. Pierre si era con grande passione sottoposto alle mie domande sulla storia della valle e mi aveva raccontato copiosamente le gesta di Taipi, l'eroe capostipite dell'omonima tribù dei Taipi. Quest'ultima era divenuta nota al grande pubblico soprattutto grazie al primo romanzo di Hermann Melville *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846), che raccontava dell'immersione romantica dell'autore tra i «cannibali», esaltandone i costumi e sferrando forti critiche agli artefici della loro pretesa civilizzazione. Al di là di questi aneddoti letterari e di alcuni resoconti scritti che avevo raccolto, andavo a Taipivai per conoscere più a fondo la dimensione orale legata al sito di maggior rilievo in senso culturale e patrimoniale: il *me'ae* Paeke.

Questo luogo conta undici *tiki* (rappresentazioni antropomorfe) realizzati a tutto tondo in tufo rosso (*ke'etu*) e incassati lungo i margini o al di sopra di quattro strutture litiche di pianta quadrata o rettangolare che sono state classificate come *paepae hiamoe* (piattaforme a scopo abitativo) e come *me'ae* (piattaforme cerimoniali e sacrificali). Se si eccettua l'altro grande *me'ae* 'I'ipona sull'isola di Hiva Oa (Nerici & Koch 2023), quello di Paeke è l'unico alle Marchesi e nel resto della Polinesia Francese a presentare una statuaria così imponente. Situato a circa 3 km di distanza dalla Baia del Controllore, lungo un pendio impervio che separa Taipivai dalla valle adiacente di Hatiheu, il *me'ae* è stato datato tra il XVI e il XIX secolo stando alle prime rilevazioni al radiocarbonio effettuate dalla spedizione norvegese di Thor Heyerdahl nel 1956. L'equipe di archeologi professionisti, che giunse alle Marchesi navigando dalle coste del Perù a bordo dell'imbarcazione Kon-Tiki (Heyerdahl 1965), effettuò scavi e rilievi nel sopra evocato *me'ae* 'I'ipona e fu protagonista anche del restauro di Paeke, che allora si trovava avvolto dalla vegetazione. In realtà, questo luogo ricondotto alla tribù dei Taipi era stato oggetto di descrizioni già dalla fine dell'Ottocento, tra cui quelle dell'etnologo e psichiatra tedesco Karl Von den Steinen, che aveva recensito i nomi di quattro *tiki* (Von den Steinen 1928). Nonostante vari dettagli su Paeke fossero stati ripresi e discussi anche da altri studiosi (Linton 1925; Suggs 1961; Heyerdahl 1965; Ferdon 1965), le poche informazioni sulla memoria orale rinvenibili nelle fonti mi spingevano a fare ulteriori ricerche. Così, su consiglio del già evocato Pierre, ero stato affidato alla guida di un uomo che abita ai piedi della salita del sentiero che conduce al *me'ae* e che menzionerò qui solo come G., per tutelarne l'identità.

Fig. 1. Veduta frontale di una delle tre piattaforme litiche del *me'ae* Paeke nella valle di Taipivai, Nuku Hiva, giugno 2021 ©Giacomo Nerici

G. aveva deciso di guidarmi a Paeke presentandosi come una sorta di «guardiano» legittimato al racconto della storia locale e come portavoce di alcune connessioni «sentite» o «avvertite» con i *tiki*. Vantandosi di conoscerne i nomi e considerandoli addirittura come «amici» o «compagni», egli ammetteva talvolta di confidarsi con loro in segreto. Il fatto di abitare sulla terra vicino al sito e di aver ricevuto qualche testimonianza sulla storia locale gli dava un'aria di conoscitore privilegiato. A più riprese aveva rimarcato questo legame particolare sotto il diluvio che accompagnava il nostro tragitto in salita tra le palme e la foresta attorno a Paeke. Se fino a qualche anno fa il luogo era stato oggetto di pulizia e di rimozione della vegetazione per facilitare il tour di piccoli gruppi di croceristi, che ogni due settimane giungevano con la nave Aranui, quando arrivavo nel giugno del 2021 esso si trovava nell'incolto, tra l'erba alta e i rampicanti. Ben presto, trovandoci dinanzi alle piattaforme di pietra e ai diversi *tiki*, mi resi conto che nella spiegazione di G. le molte lacune venivano colmate cercando di trovare dei nomi per le statue che apparivano frutto di interpretazioni piuttosto soggettive. Così, ad esempio, per rispondere alle mie domande, G. mi aveva detto che quel *tiki* corrispondeva a Keikanui, un eroe locale protagonista di varie saghe isolane ma poco riconducibili alla storia di Paeke, e che tal altro era invece Pakoko, un capo politico che si rivoltò e fu giustiziato dai francesi subito dopo aver preso possesso dell'arcipelago nel 1842. Senza voler mettere in dubbio le sue conoscenze non obbiettai apertamente a quello che mi raccontava ma egli si spinse oltre quando mi chiese di montare assieme a lui su una delle strutture di pietra. Voleva mostrarmi un *tiki* e alcuni particolari che a suo avviso testimoniavano i sacrifici umani e, di fronte alle mie resistenze, aveva insistito convincendomi del fatto che, in sua compagnia, il luogo mi avrebbe in qualche modo «accettato». Contravvenendo a un rispetto che sapevo di dover mostrare e pur memore delle esperienze di Aria, fui alla fine persuaso a montare sul *me'ae*. Ciononostante, dopo poco dei capogiri e un inspiegabile senso di pesantezza mi obbligarono presto a scendere. Oltre a sentirmi a disagio, provai un senso di fastidio quando G. decise di mostrarmi delle ossa che stavano tra i piedi divaricati del *tiki* Vehea, il più grande e noto del complesso, verso il quale egli provava un senso di vicinanza affettiva. Le aveva spacciate per resti umani e con un certo vanto le aveva poi riposte dicendo che non aveva a cuore le gesta degli archeologi e il loro atteggiamento predatorio nei confronti del patrimonio nativo.

Tornando a valle riflettei a fondo su quanto appena trascorso ma non feci menzione delle mie sensazioni con G. e, dopo averlo ripagato con dei franchi polinesiani, come mi aveva chiesto, ritornai all'abitazione di Pierre e in seguito a Taioha'e. Proprio nella casa della famiglia Fanaura-Otomimi la sera stessa del mio rientro ho vissuto un'esperienza che a stento potrei definire ordinaria, almeno per le categorie e la mia familiarità con episodi simili. Verso le tre o le quattro di notte nel letto della cameretta in cui ero stato alloggiato, mentre in uno stato di dormiveglia ero coricato a pancia in giù, improvvisamente sentii un peso molto forte schiacciarmi sulla spalla destra e poi egualmente graffiare in quello stesso punto. Avvertendo in modo palpabile queste sensazioni corporee, dalle quali mi sentivo come immobilizzato, inizialmente pensai che sulla mia schiena si fosse posato inavvertitamente il gatto che la notte entrava dall'intercapedine della tettoia in lamiera per andare in caccia di gechi lungo travi e pareti. Quando però riuscii dopo un tempo indefinibile a liberarmi dalla stretta opprimente della paralisi mi accorsi dintorno che non c'era nessun animale e che quell'esperienza non poteva essere così spiegata. Riaddormentandomi in seguito e svegliandomi l'indomani, decisi di non dire niente a Vehine e Gustave, sia per darmi del tempo per metabolizzarla sia nell'idea che la cosa non venisse accolta bene. Quella stessa mattina però mi misi a riascoltare le registrazioni della conversazione con G. a Paeke, accorgendomi di un altro particolare assai insolito: ogni volta che il dialogo si avvicinava ai *tiki* la traccia audio si interrompeva e con dei salti proseguiva oltre senza consentire la comprensione dei nomi e delle spiegazioni da parte del mio interlocutore.

Questa ulteriore stranezza mi diede coraggio per parlare, così il giorno seguente raccontai tutto ai miei ospitanti per cercar di capire se quello che mi era capitato corrispondesse a qualcosa di familiare nelle loro esperienze o interpretazioni locali. Non appena raccontai a Vehine dei capogiri sul *me'ae*, della paralisi notturna e dei salti nella registrazione, la donna precipitò in un cupo silenzio domandandomi poco dopo: «i *tiki* che hai visto e toccato (scendendo dal *me'ae*) erano coperti di muschio?». Dinanzi alla mia risposta affermativa e al fatto che il sito si trovasse in abbandono nella foresta (il muschio e la vegetazione tutt'attorno), Vehine mi disse Paeke era ancora «vivente» e che avrebbe parlato di tutto ciò con la madre, Tenu'u, una delle più rispettate guaritrici di Nuku Hiva. Dovendo però ripartire per qualche giorno sulla vicina isola di Ua Huka tornai a casa circa una settimana dopo quegli eventi, e qui fui accolto da alcuni altri racconti che non mi aspettavo. In poche parole, nella stessa notte in uno di quei giorni di mia assenza, un'esperienza di strangolamento notturno era accaduta a Noel, cugina di Vehine, che dormiva nella stanza a fianco alla mia, e alla piccola Hakahia di tre anni, che aveva pianto fino a tardi lamentando a più riprese il mio nome:

> So che sei andato (a Taipivai) con le migliori intenzioni ma questo non significa che le persone intorno a te non possano raccogliere ciò che ti porti dietro… ho parlato con mia madre e lei mi ha detto che il *mana* può tornare a distanza di tempo e toccare le persone vicine… guarda te cosa è successo a Noel e, subito prima, nella stessa notte, anche ad Hakahia? […] Haka si è sve-

> gliata improvvisamente e si lamentava di continuo… non ha dormito fino alle cinque di notte e chiamava di continuo il tuo nome: «Sakomo? Sakomo?» … comprendi quello che voglio dire adesso!? E il giorno dopo Noel ci ha raccontato la sua esperienza sentendosi strozzare con le mani intorno al collo mentre cercava di andare in bagno (Conversazione con Vehine Otomimi, Nuku Hiva, 9 luglio 2021)

Il fatto che queste due figure familiari fossero vicine per contiguità spaziale nella casa o a me connesse attraverso un legame simbolico aveva fatto propendere Vehine e Tenu'u, le donne cui è affidata la cura di queste sfere della guarigione tradizionale, ad attribuirmi una forma di responsabilità indiretta. In altri termini, il verificarsi di simili episodi a distanza di pochi giorni dai miei aveva spinto la famiglia a credere che, con le mie ricerche nella foresta di Taipivai, gli spiriti/antenati del sito di Paeke avessero assalito la casa riversandosi sulle persone più vulnerabili e vicine al sottoscritto. Questo fatto è stato così alla base di una condivisione di racconti ed esperienze passate di cui i miei interlocutori non mi avevano mai parlato ma di cui preferisco tacere per tutelare l'intimità condivisa. Al contempo, esso aveva sollecitato Tenu'u a purificare l'abitazione poiché creduta infestata dagli spiriti che avevo involontariamente portato da Taipivai. Quando tornai in casa anche io venni sottoposto ad un percorso di cura per mano della guaritrice, che mi raccomandò di mettere una lozione di «Pompeia» (acqua di colonia) sugli orifizi prima di andare a letto e di applicare le foglie di *noni* (*Morinda citrifolia*) sotto al cuscino, così come sotto le ascelle e nella zona del pube qualora mi fossi avventurato nella foresta alla ricerca di rovine. Entrambi questi rimedi, infatti, sono creduti espedienti per tenere lontane presenze invisibili che possono assalire chi è «sprovvisto» delle difese culturali, cioè della familiarità con il *mana* dell'isola o dell'arcipelago. Secondo l'anziana, ciò che mi era accaduto e che si era poi riversato su altri era causato dal *mana* ancora presente a Paeke e dai *tiki* che «non vogliono farsi raccontare» attraverso le versioni «inventate» di cui ero stato testimone.

Quindi secondo tale spiegazione gli antenati intendevano «proteggere» la storia evitando che fosse narrata ricorrendo ad invenzioni o rimaneggiamenti da parte di interpreti in qualche modo illegittimi. La trasmissione di una certa versione del passato ci informa dunque sull'agency attribuita a queste entità non umane e, allo stesso tempo, ben testimonia quali strategie i custodi della tradizione inscenino per affrancare il proprio racconto. A detta di Tenu'u, per riparare a questa trasgressione, il solo modo era tornare sul posto in compagnia di qualcuno di esperto e di fidato che avrebbe dovuto «calmare» gli spiriti/antenati offesi, raccontando la versione «corretta» della tradizione di quel luogo. Prima però di incontrare la guaritrice, avevo avuto modo di tornare a Paeke assieme a Jean-Pierre Priotua, detto «Sou», un uomo di sessant'anni originario di Taipivai e per molto tempo guida turistica all'hotel Keikahanui Pearl Lodge di Taioha'e. Jean-Pierre beneficiava inoltre di una connessione particolare con Paeke poiché la madre era stata collaboratrice dell'archeologo americano Robert Suggs durante i suoi scavi a Nuku Hiva negli anni Cinquanta. Il mio interlocutore aveva messo per iscritto alcune conoscenze orali ereditate dalla madre e alcune altre che provenivano per conto di Suggs, diventando anche agli occhi della mia famiglia ospitante il portavoce più autorevole dalla storia locale di Paeke e tra i più competenti conoscitori di Taipivai. Lo stesso Jean-Pierre, recandoci insieme a Paeke, mi aveva confidato che le mie disgrazie erano dovute al fatto che ero forzosamente montato sul *me'ae* e che la storia di cui ero stato uditore era frutto di interpretazioni soggettive, che il luogo impediva venissero divulgate attraverso le mie ricerche e le mie future scritture.

> Tu non sei abituato al *mana* di questi luoghi perché non sei marchesiano… quindi sei esposto, come i Tahitiani che vengono alle Marchesi, ad avere esperienze come quelle che mi racconti (Intervista con Jean-Pierre Priotua, Nuku Hiva, 11 luglio 2021).

Sollevata all'idea che alla fine fossi tornato ai *tiki* in compagnia di Jean-Pierre, Tenu'u mi raccomandò di applicare i rimedi sopracitati e, a riprova del fatto che gli spiriti fossero calmati, mi chiese di riguardare le foto che avevo scattato. In particolare, trattandosi di una pressione forte quella avvertita sulla schiena, a suo avviso dovevo guardare la foto del *tiki* «maschio» che avevo toccato per scendere dal *me'ae*, verificando che la sua immagine comparisse nell'istantanea[5].

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[5] Nelle credenze locali è piuttosto comune riconoscere la presenza del *mana* o degli antenati sulla base di percezioni corporee o segni che vengono spiegati con riprove di carattere empirico. Così, ad esempio, circostanze apparentemente inspiegabili come foto in cui non appaiono i soggetti, registrazioni che vengono interrotte e, nei casi più gravi, veri e propri incidenti o disgrazie diventano l'evidenza di un luogo che non intende mostrarsi o la punizione di spiriti ritenuti offesi se non adeguatamente rispettati (Donaldson 2019).

Fig. 2. Primo piano del *tiki* da me toccato scendendo da una delle strutture del *me'ae* Paeke, Nuku Hiva, giugno 2021 ©Giacomo Nerici

Mesi dopo, quando avevo ritrovato Jean-Pierre a Nuku Hiva dopo le mie peripezie sulle altre isole, così mi aveva rivelato a proposito di quella «manipolazione» simbolica operata dinanzi al *me'ae*, che aveva «consentito» al *tiki* di non essere più malevolo:

> Quando mi hai raccontato quello che ti è successo ho capito che G. aveva frainteso la storia e che i *tiki* di Paeke non lo avevano accettato. È molto forte ciò che ti è arrivato e io l'ho sentito, per questo ti ho chiesto se volevi tornarci, come mi sentivo che doveva essere fatto. Gli spiriti e la storia dovevano essere rimessi al loro posto affinché non ti seguissero oltre, perché lui non ha saputo gestirli (*maitriser*) e tu che non eri del posto hai subito le conseguenze. Tenu'u diceva bene sul fatto che saresti dovuto tornare sul sito e avendolo fatto insieme alla fine abbiamo rimesso a posto (*remmener*) quello che ti è successo… (Conversazione con Jean-Pierre Priotua, Nuku Hiva, 3 giugno 2022)

Pur avendo «rimesso a posto» la storia e «trasformato» il *tiki* da una presenza nefasta in un protettore, come mi aveva detto Tenu'u, queste esperienze notturne si erano però ripetute in altre occasioni nel prosegup dei miei spostamenti nell'arcipelago. Del resto l'anziana mi aveva avvertito sulle possibili conseguenze:

> le cose che hai avuto non sono finite, ritorneranno vedrai… lo so, conosco i *paepae* (intesi come *me'ae*) e alcuni sono ancora viventi come quello, e bisogna che te lo dicano… devi continuare a metterti il *monoi* (olio inteso come Pompeia) tutte le sere prima di andare a dormire (Conversazione con Tenu'u, Nuku Hiva, 18 luglio 2021).

Non avevo seguito alla lettera i suoi consigli di coricarmi usando quei rimedi perché pensai che dopo qualche tempo i problemi fossero stati ormai risolti. Tuttavia, le mie ricerche sulle tracce del passato immerse nella vegetazione mi avevano portato a visitare altre valli, baie e creste sulle restanti isole, riproponendo in altre due circostanze delle esperienze simili a quella già vissuta a Nuku Hiva. La prima era accaduta a Ua Pou, al termine del mio iniziale periodo di quasi un mese e mezzo di soggiorno tra il centro principale di Hakahau e altre zone dell'isola. Ad Hakahau ero stato ospitato a casa di Jacob «Sako» Kaiha, un'importante personalità che aveva diretto per anni il CSP (scuola pubblica), era stato vice-sindaco dell'isola ed era anche uno dei più talentuosi scultori delle Marchesi. Negli ultimi giorni di un periodo ricco di incontri, interviste e anche escursioni nella foresta, trovandomi di notte a dormire nella camera in cui ero alloggiato, improvvisamente in uno stato di dormiveglia mi sentii schiaffeggiare su una gamba e poi pizzicare su un piede. Impaurito dalle sensazioni provate mi ero poi rannicchiato in una posizione fetale per non esporre braccia e gambe a quel tipo di molestie, riaddormentandomi solo dopo un po' in preda a interrogativi e foschi pensieri.

Senza, ancora una volta, raccontare subito il fatto ai miei interlocutori, aspettai qualche giorno e nel mentre che parlavo con uno dei due figli di Sako, Heapo, di un'intervista condotta ad una persona di sua conoscenza su temi di questo tipo, emerse la circostanza giusta per confidargli i fatti di Nuku Hiva e cosa mi era appena successo a casa loro. La mia testimonianza aveva aperto uno spazio di confidenza su alcune pregresse esperienze reciproche, spingendo poi Heapo a chiedere lumi ad una veggente originaria delle Isole Tuamotu con cui lui si confidava per importanti questioni personali. Come mi aveva inoltre rivelato lo stesso Heapo, un ulteriore motivo per chiamare Mami Renée di Rangiroa e assumersi il compito di aiutarmi a guarire giaceva in un sogno fatto qualche giorno prima. In breve, in quello strano sogno mi aveva sentito urlare per ben due volte il suo nome fino a svegliarsi e venire nella mia camera per prendere atto che la cosa fosse reale, chiedendo addirittura conferma poi alla madre se avesse udito anche lei quelle grida. Questo fatto, che per l'occasione era venuto a galla, veniva adesso interpretato come una mia richiesta di aiuto per scacciare gli spiriti attraverso il consulto e la mediazione della guaritrice di Rangiroa.

Al telefono Mami Renée, messa al corrente di tutto ciò, aveva riferito al mio interlocutore che la ragione delle mie disavventure era dovuta all'azione di un uomo che, attraverso i *tiki* di Nuku Hiva, mi aveva lanciato un maleficio (*nani kaha*). La stessa versione veniva sottolineata anche da Tenu'u quando diceva che taluni volevano tenere lontani gli estranei:

> qui le persone del posto non amano gli stranieri o quelli che vengono da altre isole come me (originaria di Tahuata), ma io conosco i medicamenti e su di me queste cose non hanno effetto… (Conversazione con Tenu'u, Nuku Hiva, 18 luglio 2021).

Come conseguenza, la *mami* aveva illustrato a Heapo un trattamento terapeutico basato sulla preparazione di un infuso vegetale di sette foglie di *noni* e sette fiori di *miri* (*Ocimum gratissimum*) da bollire in sette litri d'acqua, con il quale io dovevo detergermi il corpo e infine bere.

> Devi essere tu a raccogliere le foglie e i fiori perché io non sono un guaritore e non posso interferire tra te e quello che hai… normalmente può essere solo il guaritore o il paziente stesso a maneggiare le piante e a preparare l'infuso perché non può essere contaminato da estranei (Conversazione con Heapo Kaiha, Ua Pou, 20 settembre 2021).

La notte stessa, muniti di torce, seguendo Heapo per il giardino e in quello dei parenti nelle case affianco, siamo andati a cercare le piante per fare l'infuso; un'operazione assai delicata poiché la contaminazione da parte di terzi, il dosaggio errato degli ingredienti o il procedimento scorretto dei preparativi non solo rischiano di inficiare l'efficacia terapeutica ma possono ripercuotersi sul soggetto della cura. Dopo aver quindi scelto, lavato e avvolto ciascun fiore di *miri* all'interno di ogni foglia di *noni* dovevo lasciare che essi bollissero in una pentola fino a quando le stesse foglie non divenissero più scure.

> Più scuro sarà il colore dell'infuso, più forte sarà l'influsso negativo su di te da allontanare… alla fine dei tre giorni, come vedrai, il liquido diventerà via via più limpido se la cura ha successo (Conversazione con Heapo Kaiha, Ua Pou, 20 settembre 2021).

Nella spiegazione locale, quindi, la gravità del problema in termini magici si misura in base al colore più o meno scuro e torbido dell'infuso.

> Quando l'infuso si raffredda, diventando tiepido, dovrai prenderti del tempo in bagno per detergere il tuo corpo in modo integrale con le foglie. Per lavarti, secondo quanto dice la veggente, devi cominciare dalla testa e poi discendere verso i piedi perché gli spiriti entrano dalla terra e poi risalgono il corpo fino alla testa dove si concentra solitamente il *mana* (Conversazione con Heapo Kaiha, Ua Pou, 20 settembre 2021).

Per tre giorni ho ripetuto alla sera il procedimento descritto, bollendo il preparato con cui lavarmi fuori e «dentro» e monitorandone al contempo la progressiva limpidezza. Per qualche tempo, spostandomi per altre ricerche sulla vicina isola di Ua Huka, nessun altro episodio simile era tornato a tormentarmi.

Fig. 3. Particolare dell'infuso a base di fiori di *miri* e foglie di *noni* al termine del ciclo terapeutico, Ua Pou, settembre 2021 © Giacomo Nerici

Il terzo ed ultimo evento era accaduto mesi dopo a Hiva Oa risiedendo per una settimana nella valle di Puamau, dove mi ero recato per approfondire delle ricerche sul già menzionato *me'ae* 'I'ipona, che proprio di recente – assieme ad altri «beni misti in serie» (insiemi di natura e cultura) dell'arcipelago – è diventato parte di quelli ufficialmente inscritti nella lista del patrimonio materiale all'UNESCO. Senza voler qui soffermarmi sulla complessa stratificazione di storie, discorsi e interpretazioni legate ai monumentali *tiki* di pietra di 'I'ipona, di cui ho dato conto in un recente articolo (Nerici & Koch 2023), mi limito qui a menzionare brevemente quanto mi era capitato mentre alloggiavo in un edificio comunale a fianco della piccola scuola locale. In questa sistemazione provvisoria le autorità politiche dell'isola mi avevano gentilmente allestito un letto e un fornello da campo per poter cucinare, e così tornando dai miei incontri o dalle mie escursioni per la valle autonomamente potevo risiedervi. Durante una di quelle notti però, non appena mi adagiai sul letto, ancora ben sveglio e cosciente avvertii un peso molto consistente posarsi sui miei stinchi e tirare addirittura le coperte, scoprendo parzialmente i miei piedi. Dopo poco inclinai in su il busto per comprendere se nel buio ci fosse qualcosa di concreto posato sul lenzuolo sopra le mie gambe, ma il tentativo fu inutile e senza più riuscire a muovermi alla fine mi riaddormentai. Memore della lezione dei casi precedenti cercai di trovare spiegazione dell'evento interpellando alcuni dei miei più fidati collaboratori a Puamau ma nessuno di loro si espose, sapendo dirmi a cosa potesse corrispondere la circostanza né perché era accaduta. Se le guarigioni erano state efficaci, come dovevo interpretare questo nuovo avvenimento?

Simili quesiti rimasero irrisolti finché non approdai a Tahuata, l'isola che si trova a poche miglia nautiche da Hiva Oa, dove finii ospite da Teiki «Kiki» Timau, un *tonton* (zio) materno di Vehine. Non appena lui mi vide ebbe uno strano approccio nei miei confronti ma si limitò a tacere finché a cena, il giorno stesso del mio arrivo, mi chiese se c'era qualcosa che mi opprimeva o mi faceva particolarmente sentire stanco nell'ultimo periodo. Fu a quel punto che raccontai le mie vicende (stra)ordinarie e che lui stesso si palesò come guaritore, dal momento che aveva ricevuto il «dono» dalla madre (cioè la sorella di Tenu'u), la quale era originaria proprio dell'isola di Tahuata. Alla luce di quanto era accaduto a Hiva Oa, Kiki aveva insistito affinché dormissi con una foglia di *noni* sotto al cuscino, proponendosi poi di massaggiarmi il corpo per allontanare ciò che mi stava opprimendo.

L'indomani mattina Kiki ammise di aver sognato. Nel sogno lui, assieme ad altri cacciatori, aveva prima avvistato e poi abbattuto un grosso maiale selvatico (lo spirito malvagio su di me). Era sollevato all'idea che il problema avesse avuto una simile conclusione nella dimensione onirica, perché sul piano corporeo sapeva che ciò sarebbe equivalso al poter allontanare l'entità spirituale dal mio corpo. Per fare ciò il guaritore mi aveva chiesto di sottopormi ad un massaggio con del *monoi* (unguento vegetale) cominciando dai piedi e risalendo alla testa. Il verso del massaggio, di fatto contrario a quello del bagno terapeutico di Mami Renée, era dovuto alla convinzione da parte del mio guaritore che lo spirito dovesse infine uscire proprio dal capo:

> [la testa] non si può massaggiarla a caso. Si comincia sempre dai piedi per terminare alla fine con la testa perché lo spirito entra dai piedi ed esce da lì! (Conversazione con Teiki «Kiki» Timau, Tahuata, 27 novembre 2021).

Come Kiki mi spiegava durante il massaggio, l'alta concentrazione di *mana* in questa parte del corpo lo invitava a prestare una premura diversa, evitando di essere troppo vigoroso come a volte procedeva altrove. Così, mentre sentiva lo spirito assalirlo, egli mi confidava:

> Mia madre mi ha detto che devo massaggiarti e che per tre giorni dovrai mettere la foglia di *noni* sotto al cuscino prima di andare a dormire… Sai perché si comincia dai piedi e non altrove? Perché il freddo entra in primo luogo dai piedi e così anche gli spiriti. Gli spiriti entrano nel corpo dalla terra. Guarda la mia pelle, ho i brividi, la pelle d'oca. Significa che lo spirito che è in te sta venendo in contatto con il mio corpo ed entrando lentamente dentro di me… lo sento, è potente e mi provoca questa reazione. Ma è normale che sia così ed è un bene per te che io sia protetto contro di lui, non può nuocermi perché so come respingerlo essendo un guaritore. Il massaggio serve per allontanare lo spirito e portandolo dentro di me lo sto assorbendo per fornirgli un altro corpo… l'importante è non avere paura ed essere in grado di sopportarlo per poi scacciarlo! (Conversazione con Teiki «Kiki» Timau, Tahuata, 27 novembre 2021).

Al termine dell'intenso massaggio Kiki aveva un'ultima raccomandazione da darmi per portare a termine la terapia cui mi aveva sottoposto: «Vai adesso a bagnarti in mare perché hai bisogno di liberarti definitivamente di ciò che avevi nel corpo!». Seguendo alla lettera il suo consiglio andai a bagnarmi nell'acqua di mare, immergendomi oltre la secca di coralli nella baia di Vaitahu. La convinzione che il mare possa allontanare definitivamente gli spiriti negativi ricorre anche in altri contesti polinesiani, come testimonia in prima persona lo stesso Matteo Aria nel suo libro (Aria

2007). Per due giorni mi sottoposi a questo trattamento, finché Kiki non ebbe la riprova dell'esito positivo cui era andato incontro il suo sforzo terapeutico. Una mattina mi svegliò infatti dicendomi che aveva nuovamente sognato qualcosa d'inerente alla mia vicenda. Nel sonno era stato assalito da una figura maschile con la quale aveva avuto una colluttazione.

> Sfortunatamente non sono riuscito a vederlo bene in volto perché è poi fuggito altrove. Era un uomo, grande e grosso, ma era adirato perché sapeva che massaggiandoti gli ho fatto del male. Oggi la persona che ti ha inviato questo maleficio avrà sicuramente qualcosa di negativo perché l'ho respinto e gli ho rinviato il male che ti ha fatto (Conversazione con Teiki «Kiki» Timau, Tahuata, 28 novembre 2021).

Non ho mai avuto la testimonianza o la riprova che ciò sia mai avvenuto ma con certezza posso ammettere che da allora in poi episodi simili non si sono più verificati su di me. Oltre al dovere di riflettere sulla realtà «magica» o non ordinaria di cui avevo fatto esperienza, tali accadimenti mi sollecitavano a trovare una formula «etica» o «morale» sul come raccontarli, senza correre il rischio di fraintendere il punto di vista dei miei interlocutori o finire per essere ridicolizzato dalla comunità accademica tornando poi in Italia.

Dilemmi oltre il campo: raccontare, interpretare, problematizzare l'esperienza

Al pari di quanto accaduto al già citato Aria (2007), anche i miei interlocutori mi lasciavano con l'arduo compito di dover raccontare questi accadimenti. Per un verso c'era un'aspettativa sul piano dell'interpretazione della storia locale come, in uno degli ultimi nostri incontri, mi aveva ricordato Jean-Pierre con un tono eloquente ma fatalistico.

> A te adesso di saper scrivere senza fraintendere la storia che hai vissuto e di riflettere sulle parole da usare, se ti sentirai di scrivere quello che ti è successo, per far sì che il *pa'io'io* (spirito degli antenati) dei *tiki* di Paeke alla fine non venga offeso (Conversazione con Jean-Pierre Priotua, Nuku Hiva, 3 giugno 2022).

Non avendo in questa sede intenzione di affrontare l'ordine del discorso relativo ai conflitti sulla storia locale e alle controverse interpretazioni relative al nome dei *tiki*, preferisco almeno su questo punto tacere o non addentrarmi. Rimane indubbio, tuttavia, che – come concordano lui, Tenu'u e anche gli altri protagonisti citati – il nodo di fondo della questione ruota attorno alle frizioni sulle varie interpretazioni patrimoniali poiché in virtù dell'oblio diversi attori sono oggi impegnati a legittimare in modo più o meno autorevole la propria parola per accreditarsi nel milieu locale. In questo caso, nelle spiegazioni dei miei interlocutori, sia dei guaritori che dei «custodi della memoria», G. avendo mistificato e frainteso una versione considerata più ufficiale della storia locale e costringendomi a montare sul *me'ae* avrebbe offeso gli spiriti/antenati di Paeke, la cui reazione sarebbe stata la fonte delle disavventure notturne. Per altri, come per Mami Renée e per Kiki, le ragioni sarebbero state leggermente diverse, cioè riconducibili ad un maleficio (*nani kaha*) provocato da un uomo, probabilmente di Nuku Hiva, anche se non è mai stato chiarito se il responsabile dell'attacco magico coincideva con lo stesso G. Sebbene così in un certo senso sembra apparire l'episodio, rimane per me difficile avallare con certezza una simile interpretazione e trovare una linearità o una coerenza tra gli eventi, le spiegazioni, la cura. A prescindere da ciò, tuttavia, resta il fatto che varie esperienze da me vissute e incorporate sono andate incontro ad un processo di «oggettificazione culturale» (Csordas 1990), che ha consentito ai guaritori locali di poter identificare il tipo di problema, comprendendone la causa e individuando le soluzioni[6].

Un secondo ordine del discorso interessa il piano stretto del racconto dell'esperienza e le negoziazioni in merito a che cosa dire e su che cosa tacere. Diversamente rispetto ai *tapu* legati al segreto e ai pericoli del divulgare certe conoscenze familiari di cui parlava Aria citando il caso di Malona Teura (Aria 2007: 281-289), la mia disponibilità a parlarne non è stata esplicitamente ostacolata dai diversi portatori della tradizione avvicinati a Paeke né mi è stato vietato di raccontare in merito alle guarigioni. Sebbene Tenu'u ed altri della famiglia Fanaura-Otomimi avessero interpretato gli accadimenti a contatto con gli spiriti e le cesure nelle registrazioni come segni del fatto che il luogo non vuol farsi raccontare o di una mia presenza

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[6] Un simile passaggio veniva accuratamente riassunto dal già citato Thomas J. Csordas raccontando le sedute curative in ambienti protestanti per allontanare gli spiriti maligni, considerati delle vere e proprie espressioni demoniache. «Le persone non percepiscono un demone dentro di loro, ma percepiscono un particolare pensiero, comportamento o emozione come fuori dal loro controllo. È il guaritore, specialista nell'oggettivazione culturale, che tipicamente "discerne" se il problema di un supplicante è di origine demoniaca e che, quando si trova di fronte a una persona che si autodiagnostica come "posseduta", è piuttosto probabile che attribuisca la presentazione di quella persona a "problemi emotivi"» (Csordas 1990: 14).

indesiderata, non ho avuto impedimenti ad accedere alle testimonianze orali o divieti di divulgare le confidenze. L'unica eccezione, in tal senso, sono le note per iscritto di cui mi ha parlato Jean-Pierre relative a Paeke, menzionate più volte ma mai mostratemi. Non aver insistito oltre per averle rientra però in un atteggiamento di rispetto che ho voluto mantenere con il mio interlocutore, nell'idea che una parte della conoscenza possa essere divulgabile e un'altra debba rimanere intima e privata, senza per questo divenire *tapu* o essere circondata da punizioni. Contrariamente ad altri contesti indigeni oceaniani, in Polinesia Francese non vi sono nette distinzioni etniche tra un piano «nativo» e uno che non lo è, come invece è avvenuto in arcipelaghi di colonizzazione anglofona con la creazione, ad esempio, dei dipartimenti *kānaka maoli* alle Hawai'i o delle università *māori* ad Aotearoa/Nuova Zelanda. La francofonia ha piuttosto privilegiato una commistione tra elementi nativi e francesi e, orientando i quadri di espressione delle rivendicazioni polinesiane, ha incentivato una loro compatibilità con i valori morali e civili della République. Una simile situazione in parte spiega la scarsa presenza di un ceto intellettuale o di studiosi nativi in Polinesia Francese e, in particolare alle Marchesi, rispetto ai contesti oceaniani appena evocati. Non vi sono pertanto antropologi o archeologi marchesiani che hanno rivendicato ruoli esclusivi di portavoce, di filtro e di legittimazione nella comunità per parlare di questioni della cultura locale. Pertanto, al di là di qualche forma di occultamento della conoscenza come tutela pubblica, la mia condizione di antropologo bianco (non francese) non è stata alla base di aperte forme di rigetto o di accuse di «estrattivismo» della conoscenza nativa. In altre parole, identificando la mia postura come puramente tesa alla deliberata raccolta di dati o, peggio ancora, al «saccheggio» epistemologico.

Al di là di certe resistenze a condividere la conoscenza con gli studiosi stranieri per l'impossibilità di ricevere talvolta ritorni di qualche tipo, che più volte uno studioso incontra imbattendosi in ambiti molto intimi all'interno di talune cerchie familiari, il rischio di passare come «estrattivista» nel mio caso è stato contravvenuto cercando di dar vita a forme collaborative di circolarità di saperi e pratiche. In breve, costruendo occasioni di scambio di conoscenze e varie esperienze domestiche o di lavoro assieme ai miei interlocutori indigeni, per far sì che già sul terreno si creassero cornici collaborative fondate su reciprocità o condivisione. Inoltre, sono stati proprio i legami intimi e familiari ad aver permesso tanto di vivere quanto di poter raccontare senza particolari vincoli o limitazioni le esperienze (stra)ordinarie qui descritte. Questo necessario sfondo morale condiviso, a prescindere da come raccontassi altrove l'esperienza, ha creato quindi le condizioni di possibilità per esperirla in loco, per interpretarla e per condividerla con altre persone.

Parlarne sul campo ha poi costituito un fruttuoso espediente per avvicinare sfere confidenziali come la guarigione e gli ambiti dell'invisibile. Queste sfere sono tali sia perché regolate intrinsecamente da un riserbo sia perché sono state confinate nel segreto a causa del cristianesimo e della colonizzazione. Averle vissute in prima persona ha pertanto aperto spazi di condivisione inattesi, che hanno permesso ad alcuni di sentirsi legittimati a raccontare. In quanto antropologo, potevo inoltre a loro avviso dar conto con una presunta autorevolezza scientifica dell'esistenza di una realtà profondamente incorporata nei discorsi e nelle pratiche locali, come Vehine una volta mi diceva quando le avevo chiesto se potessi raccontare:

> devi farlo, perché tu hai avuto modo di sentire su di te… devi scrivere, senza paura, che i *tiki* sono viventi e il *mana* in certi luoghi è ancora presente! (Conversazione con Vehine Otomimi, Nuku Hiva, 9 luglio 2021).

Proprio una simile affermazione ci introduce ad un terzo livello di riflessione dell'esperienza che trovo altrettanto importante qui provare a introdurre. Quello cioè del reale o del concetto di realtà sensibile, in generale, legato a questo tipo di esperienze: un terreno molto controverso che chiama in causa anche al problema della razionalità dei poteri magici. Come aveva già notato De Martino ne *Il mondo magico* (1948), non si tratta soltanto di un problema ristretto all'efficacia della magia ma che ci obbliga piuttosto a interrogarci sul «nostro stesso concetto di realtà» (De Martino 1948: 22). Un processo di comprensione dell'alterità che, com'è noto, l'antropologo italiano cercava di risolvere da ultimo proponendo un «etnocentrismo critico», nell'idea di allargare la nostra coscienza storiografica per riflettere sulle categorie con le quali interpretiamo e diamo senso alla realtà (De Martino 1977). Questo spunto a consapevolizzare criticamente il proprio punto di vista attraverso il vaglio con la diversità è un aspetto che torna con forza anche in quelle posizioni relativiste ed ermeneutiche che, fra gli anni Sessanta e Settanta, hanno dato vita ad un fecondo dibattito tra antropologia e filosofia sui presupposti di razionalità che permettono la comprensione interculturale (Dei & Simonicca 1990)[7]. Evoco questo dibattito perché la

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[7] Tale dibattito scaturiva in parte da alcune letture di Peter Winch (1964) al famoso

ricerca di simili fondamenti condivisi di razionalità ha portato a rintracciare delle «teste di ponte» interculturali basate almeno su «un insieme di asserzioni vere sul mondo; alcune basilari leggi logiche come quella di identità e non contraddizione» (Dei 1997: 117). A fronte dei denominatori comuni individuati dai teorici delle «teste di ponte», il filosofo Peter Winch (1964) sosteneva invece che una possibile comprensione tra universi culturali fosse possibile non tanto su basi metafisiche quanto piuttosto su concreti ambiti del quotidiano. Questi ultimi sarebbero così la base del significato poiché secondo questa tesi il rapporto tra linguaggio e mondo scaturisce proprio a partire da contesti pratici. In breve, si tratta di quelle «forme di vita» (*Lebensform*) (Wittgenstein 1964) che, lungi dall'essere degli universi di razionalità a sé stanti e incommensurabili, implicano al pari dei giochi linguistici qualcosa che «non è fondato, non è ragionevole (o irragionevole). Stà lì – come la nostra vita» (Wittgenstein 1978: §559). «L'anti-intellettualismo di Wittgenstein consiste dunque nell'affermazione di un rapporto diretto, non mediato, tra il linguaggio e il mondo – o meglio, mediato dall'azione prima ancora che dal pensiero» (Dei 1991: 103).

Anche presupponendo implicitamente l'esistenza di un'alterità radicale o di un linguaggio alieno, l'antropologo non può esimersi dal riconoscere l'esistenza di una percezione o esperienza della realtà empirica comune a quella dei propri interlocutori in merito a determinati assunti o fenomeni sensibili.

> Magari loro credono che esistano spiriti e streghe, e noi no; noi crediamo che esista un'energia gravitazionale, che esistano le molecole e gli atomi, l'Io e il Super-Io, e loro no. Ma dobbiamo essere d'accordo sul fatto che qui c'è un fiume e non ci si può camminare sopra, che quella è una montagna e non si può attraversare, che là c'è un burrone e buttarsi nel burrone è pericoloso (Dei 1997: 118).

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testo di E. Evans-Pritchard sulla stregoneria degli Azande (Evans-Pritchard 1937), che aveva posto il problema di certi assunti come quello che si interrogava sull'esistenza o meno delle streghe. Ammettere che «le streghe non esistono» non equivale a formulare un enunciato che può avere un riscontro empirico, cioè che può risultare vero o falso rispetto ad un'esperienza condivisa della realtà (come ammettere che «una tartaruga è lenta» o «un albero sempreverde non perde le sue foglie»). In altre parole non corrisponde ad un'affermazione che può essere falsificabile rispetto alla realtà sensibile, e di cui possiamo fare esperienza sia noi che gli Azande. «"Le streghe non esistono" è piuttosto un nostro commento su un linguaggio e una cultura che ci è estranea; per questo, dice Winch, un simile enunciato non rappresenta un passo verso la comprensione, ma semplicemente testimonia la distanza e la incomprensione iniziale che ci separano da quella cultura» (Dei 1997: 114)

Seguendo questo ragionamento, quindi, ammettere che «i *tiki* o i *me'ae* possiedono il *mana*» equivale a riconoscere che su «un rovo ci siano le spine»? Queste proposizioni linguistiche per gli ʻEnana esistono attualmente come parte di una stessa realtà empirica o sensibile?

Difficile pensare pressoché in ogni luogo del mondo che, oggigiorno, tra il contesto di provenienza dell'antropologo e quello dei collaboratori nativi esista un'alterità tale per cui non si riesca a convenire su assunti di base del mondo sensibile. Sia il sottoscritto che i protagonisti delle vicissitudini al centro di questo saggio condividiamo uno stesso mondo che ci fa apparire le esperienze a contatto con gli spiriti/antenati non «reali» tanto quanto pungersi con le spine di un rovo. Inoltre, non per tutti gli ʻEnana vi è correlazione diretta tra esperienze come le interruzioni nelle registrazioni, le foto che vengono sfuocate o una serie di incidenti e l'aver calpestato i luoghi antichi, aver proferito parole irrispettose in loro presenza e così via. Sebbene, come abbiamo visto, sarebbero stati proprio azioni di questo genere ad aver provocato le esperienze di paralisi o soffocamento nel sonno di cui ho tentato di parlare, non mi sento di ammettere che ogni ʻEnana vi possa credere. Si tratta in effetti di esperienze che in generale rimangono l'esito di punti di vista soggettivi e difficilmente confutabili, che possono essere spiegati come aveva provato a fare Favret-Saada, ad esempio, ammettendo che vi sia un grado di forza magica nella vittima di un attacco del quale la strega cerca ogni volta di appropriarsi.

> La strega dispone di una certa quantità di «forza» magica, cioè di una forza pensata per produrre i suoi effetti senza l'utilizzo di normali intermediari. [...] Lo scopo della strega è quello di attirare, per mezzo della magia, la «forza» o l'energia vitale di un essere totalmente privo di mezzi magici per difendersi (Favret-Saada 1980: 70).

Per cercare di dar conto di quali attributi connotino il *mana* o gli spiriti si potrebbe ammettere che entrambi presuppongono la proprietà dell'invisibile. Del resto l'invisibile e l'infrazione dei tabù che ne regolano l'accesso o la circolazione ricordano, ad esempio, le stesse logiche del pericolo della contaminazione o dell'impurità che nella biomedicina circondano il contatto con gli agenti patogeni. Resta però difficile dimostrare che il *mana* sia una presenza invisibile a cui i Marchesiani credano tanto quanto credono oggigiorno a germi o batteri, poiché in virtù delle trasformazioni avvenute negli ultimi due secoli nessuno forse oggi rinuncerebbe alle cure ospedaliere per affidarsi ai soli rimedi erboristici della farmacopea nativa. Ciò non significa ammettere che questi ultimi non siano efficaci o che non vengano impiegati per spiegare, risolvere e guarire una serie di esperienze legate allo stato di salute o di malattia che sono culturalmente ancorate al contesto indigeno locale. Una simile porosità tra le categorie esplicative degli uni e degli altri alla luce di una storia condivisa e, più recentemente, di mondi sempre più interconnessi, rende anche a maggior ragione più problematico concepire, come proponeva Evans-Pritchard (1937) per gli oracoli degli Azande, una distinzione tra «concetti mistici», che attribuiscono ai fenomeni proprietà non logicamente deducibili dall'osservazione empirica, e «concetti di senso comune», che invece riconoscono quanto è confutabile con l'esperienza sensibile.

Per Tenu'u, per Mami Renée o per Kiki Timau, tuttavia, non ha molto senso distinguere che entrare in contatto con il *mana* o con gli spiriti sia parte di un'esperienza mistica mentre pungersi con le spine lo sia invece come prassi empirica di senso comune. Come direbbe Winch commentando l'assunto di Evans-Pritchard secondo cui «le streghe non esistono», ciò non aiuta a comprendere che cosa le streghe rappresentino nella vita e nella cultura zande: «non potremmo di fatto distinguere il reale dall'irreale senza comprendere il modo in cui tale distinzione opera all'interno del linguaggio» (Winch 1990: 123). Per molti dei miei interlocutori nativi, analogamente al fatto che le onde elettromagnetiche, i germi o gli atomi esistono anche se non si vedono, così è anche il *mana* o le entità non umane che appaiono nella foresta o di notte. Per questo motivo Vehine mi esortava a testimoniare con il mio punto di vista scientifico la veridicità della presenza degli spiriti o del *mana*. L'esperienza in prima persona mi arrogava il diritto e l'autorità per provare in termini scientifici poniamo che il *mana* sta ai germi o agli atomi tanto quanto, per citare una curiosa espressione di un mio interlocutore indigeno, «gli spiriti stanno alle idee». Pur avendone fatto testimonianza, resta comunque il problema di tradurre questi «concetti vicini all'esperienza» in «concetti lontani» da essa.

Superato l'imbarazzo che un tempo provocava il racconto di simili accadimenti tornando a casa (Stoller & Olkes 1989; Young & Goulet 1998; Goulet & Miller 2007), l'etnografo oggigiorno è più legittimato a «sostenere che siano proprio queste esperienze a offrire dei validi banchi di prova per allargare la propria consapevolezza dei limiti inerenti alle categorie analitiche con cui osserva e giudica le culture aliene» (Aria 2008: 69-70). Mentre Turner (1986) è convinto che per comprendere sia in qualche modo necessario farsi coinvolgere, condividere e partecipare in prima persona alle pratiche culturali dei nostri interlocutori, la rielaborazione di questi vissuti non ordinari da parte dell'etnografo non implica una necessaria saldatura o immedesimazione col punto di vista altrui. Secondo Geertz, è proprio nel tentativo di procedere a zigzag tra i «concetti vicini» all'esperienza, quelli di cui fanno uso i nativi, e quelli considerati «lontani» da essa, a cui dovrebbe tendere l'etnografo. Tutto ciò per evitare di finire invischiato nell'orizzonte concettuale degli indigeni e non ridurre la sua analisi a descrizioni fredde e distanti dall'esperienza dei propri collaboratori. Per usare una formula ben nota che utilizzava lo stesso Geertz per dar conto del posizionamento che dovrebbe assumere ogni approccio etnografico, occorre

> ottenere un'interpretazione di come vive una popolazione che non sia imprigionata né nei suoi orizzonti mentali, un'etnografia della stregoneria scritta da una strega, né sistematicamente sorda alle tonalità particolari della sua vita, un'etnografia della stregoneria scritta da un geometra (Geertz 2001: 73).

Partecipare e vivere simili accadimenti sulla propria pelle implica comunque doverli rielaborare criticamente e interrogarsi sul senso dell'esperienza. Quest'ultima, per contro, a prescindere da come la si voglia cogliere con le nostre lenti investigative, ha però il potere di agire su di esse, modellandole, ponendole in discussione, contribuendo ad allargarle. Ciò di cui sono stato testimone nel sonno oppure durante le mie escursioni nella foresta alle Marchesi, ha forse più di ogni altra cosa consentito di comprendere quanto precario possa essere un determinato posizionamento di partenza con il quale ognuno di noi cerca di approcciare e comprendere il mondo. Non possiamo fare a meno delle nostre categorie o di una serie di nozioni di senso comune, ma attraverso l'irrinunciabile confronto l'altro, grazie a quello che De Martino chiamava lo «scandalo iniziale dell'incontro etnografico» (De Martino 1977: 391), possiamo diventarne criticamente consapevoli. Nel circolo ermeneutico che si attiva mediante il confronto con le altrui esperienze di senso e arrivando persino ad esperirle sul proprio corpo s'innescano aspetti trasformativi (Goulet & Miller 2007; Aria 2008) in grado di espandere le categorie con il quale diamo senso e tentiamo di capire la realtà. Appare allora molto più evidente, proprio alla luce di simili esperienze che, come diceva Winch (1990: 146), «per studiare seriamente un altro modo di vita è necessario cercare di estendere il nostro – e non semplicemente portare l'altro modo entro i confini già esistenti del nostro». Beninteso, tale atteggiamento non equivale ad ammettere che si è di limitate vedute se non si riconosce la presenza o si fa diretta esperienza degli spiriti o del *mana*. Dire ciò sarebbe falso tanto quanto affermare che uno studioso non può credere alla magia o alla religione.

Simili controversie a cavallo tra antropologia e filosofia, sono tornate in varie spoglie più di recente nel dibattito teorico contemporaneo, arricchendo la dose di complessità del già contorto groviglio di questioni inerenti a ciò che è vero o ciò che reale. Interrogarsi sulla natura «vera» o «reale» del *mana* non è più un quesito inerente la credenza o la rappresentazione, dal momento l'odierna discussione è stata contraddistinta perlomeno da due altri indirizzi, alla luce dei quali la mia esperienza può essere riletta, ripensata e problematizzata altrimenti.

Il primo di questi è connesso con il cosiddetto «realismo esterno» del filosofo del linguaggio e della mente John R. Searle, secondo cui una realtà autonoma esisterebbe al di là delle rappresentazioni, dando senso ad ogni tipo di proposizione linguistica e implicando un semplice agire nel mondo (privo di ragionamento)[8]. In altre parole, la convinzione di Searle è che esista una realtà o un mondo indipendente da noi (da qui il suo «realismo esterno»), uno sfondo che preesiste le nostre interpretazioni e che è di per sé vero (Searle 2000). A questo impianto negli ultimi anni si sono sovrapposte le tesi dei sostenitori della cosiddetta «svolta ontologica», i cui sedicenti afferenti sono stati protagonisti di accesi e controversi dibattiti sul concetto di realtà e sui suoi fondamenti all'interno delle diverse cosmologie indigene (Mancuso 2018; Brigati & Gamberi 2019; Dei & Quarta 2021). Se l'intento di Searle era quello di sviluppare una teoria forte applicabile

> almeno in linea di principio, al lontano quanto al vicino, alla modernità quanto a mondi tradizionali, e che possa costituire patrimonio comune di tutte le discipline sociali, l'*ontological turn* sembra invece puntare al recupero di una sorta di autenticità antropologica. […] C'è insomma bisogno di mettere di fronte allo studioso «occidentale» (se non altro per formazione) qualcosa di radicalmente diverso: un «nativo» (Scarpelli 2019: 117).

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[8] Federico Scarpelli, che ha recentemente pubblicato un denso lavoro sul pensiero di John Searle, sottolineava a tal proposito che «il linguaggio è *pubblico* e ne consegue che, perché molto di ciò che diciamo sia intelligibile, bisogna dare per scontato che esista una realtà, che è *la stessa* per chi parla e per chi ascolta. E che tale rimane anche se i parlanti, come capita, ne dicono cose diverse. In questo modo, Searle è arrivato dove voleva, alla famosa *realtà indipendente dalle rappresentazioni* che se ne possono dare» (Scarpelli 2016: 214).

Senza aver qui il tempo di trattare debitamente questo capitolo, vorrei da ultimo tornare brevemente a riflettere se la locuzione «i *tiki* o i *me'ae* possiedono il *mana*» ha lo stesso statuto di realtà del riconoscere che su «un rovo ci siano le spine», attraverso le lenti dei sostenitori della svolta ontologica. Benché una simile riflessione andrebbe declinata in base alle diverse posizioni di chi viene associato alla «svolta», fra i tratti comuni a questi pensatori vi è però quello di rinunciare ai concetti di «credenza» o «rappresentazione» per dar conto del punto di vista indigeno attraverso una (presunta) aderenza con lo stesso senza presupporre scarti analitici. In breve, secondo questa impostazione ammettere che «i *tiki* o i *me'ae* possiedono il *mana*» equivale a riconoscere un enunciato vero e reale che renderebbe inutile ogni locuzione nell'ordine del «crede che…» o ciò «**è un s**imbolo di…» e quindi affrontare tutto il discorso in termini che implicano esegesi o teorizzazioni (Brigati 2019). In breve, rimuovendo il problema dal terreno del rappresentazionalismo à la Evans-Pritchard o da quello ermeneutico ed epistemologico su cui si sono mossi alcuni degli altri autori sopramenzionati, gli ontologi hanno cercato di portarlo su di uno secondo cui, nel nostro caso, tutti gli 'Enana concepirebbero il loro mondo come una realtà incapace di distinguere tra oggetti o luoghi che «possiedono mana» e assunti di senso comune come riconoscere che su «un rovo ci siano le spine». Come afferma Viveiros de Castro (2011: 143), lo scopo dell'antropologia «è descrivere le forme mediante le quali, e le condizioni alle quali, verità e falsità si articolano a seconda delle differenti ontologie che sono presupposte da ogni cultura». Seguendo un tale assunto, quindi, il *mana* esiste e i *tiki* o i *me'ae* ne sono pervasi diventando «viventi» perché ontologicamente la cultura polinesiana (malgrado questo termine sia avversato dagli stessi ontologi) presuppone che ciò sia vero o reale.

A tal riguardo, mi preme infine rinviare al confronto tra Eduardo Viveiros de Castro e David Graeber per mostrare tutta la problematicità che implica il rifarsi a presunte realtà fondate su criteri ontologicamente «altri», pur nella ben nota e lodevole intenzione di voler «prendere sul serio i nativi». Come rinfacciava Graeber a Viveiros de Castro, tra i rischi più evidenti dei cosiddetti «mondi multipli» teorizzati proprio da quest'ultimo vi è quello di un eccessivo relativismo che non poggia su basi epistemologiche ma su un prospettivismo che sfocia in una «anarchia ontologica». Per usare le parole dell'antropologo brasiliano, nel pensare ad «ontologie come insiemi non trattabili di presupposizioni, che contrastano aggressivamente altri insiemi, oppure che s'incrociano nel pre-spazio del caos senza avere alcuna interferenza reciproca» (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 288). Questa impostazione che finisce «per mettere le persone in scatole più profonde» (Graeber 2015: 34), moltiplicando i mondi o le realtà possibili, non riesce a spiegare come essi comunichino e siano tra loro intelligibili, se non riproponendo dei desueti schemi pre-categoriali che si rifanno ad un presunto rapporto diretto con l'Essere (Dei 2021). L'antropologia e qualsiasi approccio conoscitivo apparirebbe inutile dinanzi ad una simile constatazione, cioè pensare di far esperienza o pretendere di capire al di là del linguaggio l'alterità dei mondi nativi, a prescindere che la si concepisca come una realtà «prelogica per Lévy-Bruhl, prospettivista per Viveiros De Castro, animista o totemica per Descola» (Ivi: 364-365).

Come ho mostrato in questo scritto, vi è piuttosto una co-costruzione dell'interpretazione relativa all'esperienza (stra)ordinaria che ho cercato di cogliere, per un verso, concependo l'esistenza di un terreno di comprensione reciproco tra il mio mondo e quello dei miei interlocutori marchesiani. Per un altro, sottolineando come etnograficamente la creazione di un discorso di senso relativo all'esperienza stessa, pur talvolta contraddittorio e sfaccettato, sia sorto alla luce di legami forti consolidati una volta accolto nel milieu familiare. Uno sfondo fatto di punti di vista, di percezioni e pratiche culturalmente differenti che si amalgamano e cercano di trovare linguaggi intelligibili a partire da una serie di esperienze comuni. È proprio un simile contesto discorsivo e morale che ha quindi contribuito ad influenzare, costruire e rendere significativa una vicenda singolare sul terreno che, tornando a casa, non posso che tentare di rileggere così come di problematizzare criticamente. Ciò non significa che il *mana* o gli spiriti, al pari della stregoneria degli Azande per Evans-Pritchard, una volta di ritorno non possano esistere perché non fanno parte dell'arredo di una realtà domestica che si vorrebbe radicalmente diversa da quella nativa. Semmai i dilemmi etico-epistemologici che ho cercato qui di affrontare sono ancora una volta testimoni di quanto – pur abitando un unico mondo – continuino ad esistere cornici di senso e dimensioni interpretative che l'antropologia è chiamata a cogliere mediante l'inevitabile «giro lungo» del confronto con la differenza. Queste espressioni del significato non sono il frutto di rigide barriere tra mondi multipli e ontologicamente altri ma scaturiscono da esperienze concrete e terreni talvolta comuni la cui diversità, presentando confini porosi, continua a rendere non solo necessario ma sempre arricchente ogni incontro etnografico.

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