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# Housing precarity

## *A fourfold epistemological lancet for dissecting the housing conditions of migrants*

Senyo Dotsey and Francesco Chiodelli

*This paper puts forward the relevance of the concept of precarity in the investigation of the housing conditions of migrants. With this aim, the article presents an inductive journey, anchored in the analysis of the roots of migrant housing problems in Italy. Specific attention is paid to the connection of causal factors internal to the housing system (e.g. the shortcomings of the public housing system, the marginality of the private rental market, and the spread of illegal renting) with the functioning of public institutions, demonstrating that the housing precarity of migrants in Italy is institutionally constructed, maintained and shaped. Subsequently, the reflection lands on the notion of precarity; use of said term – which is usually confined to the analysis of the labor market – is extended to the field of housing. Four main epistemological dimensions of the concept of precarity are identified and explored: i) the centrality of the political and institutional creation of precarity; ii) the intersection of personal attributes and structural forces, of local and global causes; iii) the understanding of sectoral problems as part and parcel of an ontological condition of risk and*

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*uncertainty; iv) the indication of precarity as a potential point of departure for collective political agency, in particular among the disparate groups which – despite being marginalized by neoliberal exploitation – are not represented by traditional working-class organizations. The paper concludes with a note on migrant housing in pandemic times.*

*'I worked in Bergamo for 13 years. I was in a shared rented four-room apartment with three other people. I left this place after losing my job. I moved to another apartment with two other people after getting another job. I then lost my job again and had to leave. After that, I went to a charity association and got a place in a homeless dormitory for three months. This is my third time coming to the dormitory. I've slept rough – in the streets, train station, parks, airport – for months while I waited for my turn to enter the dormitory' (Kofie, interview, July 2018).*

## Introduction: reconceptualising migrants' housing problems

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, migration flows to Europe (recently framed in terms of a 'refugee crisis') and a variety of immigration-related political and policy questions have been at the center of public debate, alongside the stresses and strains of multiculturalism and a rise in xenophobic discourses and movements. Conversely, other migration-related themes more connected to migrants' integration have received comparatively scant public and policy consideration. This is the case for housing. The lack of public concern for migrant housing contrasts with the fact 'housing represents perhaps the most important of urban conditions for the settlement of immigrants and is certainly the most critical' (Tosi 2001a, 1), as highlighted by research work on different aspects of migrant settlement trajectories and housing conditions (see, among many others, Arbaci 2019; Boccagni 2014, 2017 and 2018; Darling 2017; Kissoon 2010; Kourachanis 2019; Phillips 2006).

This paper intervenes into this academic debate on migrant housing, with the aim of contributing to the development of a conceptual apparatus capable of strengthening and making the analysis of the various aspects of migrant inhabitation practices more holistic. In fact, some of the concepts used most today – such as housing deprivation – are, in our opinion, not completely satisfactory, for example because they tend to favor a simplistic association between housing problems and poverty, or because they implicitly promote a passive and atomistic view of migrants. It is within this framework that the current paper argues for the need to mobilise the concept of precarity in the exploration of migrants' housing problems. In fact, as it has been used both by the academic literature (mainly in the field of the labor market) and by some social movements, the concept of precarity provides an interpretative framework which emphasizes the political-institutional matrix of the questions under investigation, which are seen as part and parcel of a comprehensive environment of causes and conditions; at the same time, it stresses the potential

agency of precarised people in creating new forms of political subjectivity. Against this backdrop, the present article demonstrates the original and relevant epistemological value of the notion of precarity through an inductive journey, which commences with the analysis of the roots of migrants' housing problems in Italy and arrives at the theoretical exploration of the concept of precarity within the investigation of such questions.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: following a methodological note and the contextualization of migrant and housing questions in Italy, the article investigates the main structural causes of the problems migrants face in terms of accommodation in Italy vis-à-vis the housing system. In light of the analysis, we discuss the importance of the notion of precarity for an in-depth understanding of migrant housing issues and their political-institutional roots. In particular, four main epistemological dimensions of such a concept are analyzed. A post-scriptum on migrant housing precarity in pandemic times concludes the paper.

## A methodological note

This is a conceptual paper that stems from an inductive research trajectory, which began with in-depth fieldwork exploration, namely the empirical investigation of the housing conditions of male sub-Saharan migrants in an Italian city. The findings of said fieldwork represent the catalyst for developing a conceptual reasoning whose epistemological value goes far beyond the case at the center of the fieldwork. This fieldwork is only very partially presented in this article, in the form of excerpts from some interviews. In narrative terms, the aim of the interviews is to give life to our analysis of the migrant housing situation in Italy, which has been carefully reconstructed through textual analysis – specifically the consideration of relevant policy documents, legislative sources, and statistical data, together with academic literature.

The empirical exploration from which the interview excerpts are taken was conducted from May 2018 to June 2019 in the city of Bergamo, in Northern Italy. Forty-seven semi-structured interviews with sub-Saharan African migrants were collected. The interview questions revolved around the migrants' background (socio-demographic and economic profile; motives, expectations, experiences related to migration), legal status, housing conditions and history, experiences in and outside reception camps, and coping mechanisms. Interviewees were identified through snowball sampling (to reduce distortion associated with this sampling technique, we selected interviewees through different gateways, such as markets, churches, recreational centers, and migrants' popular gathering places). The interviewees came from different sub-Saharan African countries and were working age males between 18 and 60. All were low-income economic migrants, asylum-seekers or refugees, living in uncertain and precarious conditions. This sample is representative of a minority portion of migrants in Italy. As we will explain in the next section, in fact, migration flows in Italy are internally very diversified. Each migrant sub-group presents even radically different characteristics, for example in terms of integration trajectories and socio-demographic composition. A peculiarity of some migrant

sub-groups is, for instance, the gender balance: migratory flows from sub-Saharan Africa have a predominantly male composition, unlike, for example, migrations from the Philippines or the Ukraine, which are instead composed predominantly of women (who come to Italy to carry out specific tasks related to personal care and assistance). Gender composition profoundly influences the housing trajectories – for instance, migrants who work in the personal care sectors usually reside in the homes of the people they care for (Boccagni 2018). Nevertheless, the specificity of the group we interviewed does not affect the possibility to refer to these interviews, since the excerpts we include in the text do not have a ‘representative’ function, but only an illustrative and almost anecdotal purpose.

It is worth specifying that the choice to focus on sub-Saharan migrants is motivated by two reasons. The first reason is substantive: this group dominated the recent inflows to Italy and is at the heart of the so-called refugee crisis; it is also (but not only) for this reason that they live in particularly critical housing conditions (therefore, this group is a sort of ‘extreme case’; Flyvbjerg 2006). The second reason is procedural: one of the two authors of this paper is a Ghanaian researcher in the diaspora, a fact which facilitated access to such migrant groups, as testified in the words of an interviewee: *‘I’ve granted you the interview because you’re African; You know I don’t know you enough but I’m telling you these things, my life history because you’re one of us — I can’t narrate these things to other people.’* (Maalik, interview, August 2018)

To conclude this methodological note, it is worth answering the following question: why Italy? Italy is a significant context from at least two viewpoints. The first has an empirical and contingent nature: in recent years, Italy has been one of the countries most affected by the flows of refugees trying to reach Europe due to its geographic position; this critical condition will probably remain unaltered in the coming years, especially in the absence of shared migration policies among the various European countries. The second reason has an epistemological nature: the case of Italy, although specific, is not exceptional. Precarity is, in fact, a structural condition of the contemporary lives of migrants in many European countries (Schierup and Jørgensen 2016). At the same time, several European countries suffer from a housing crisis for some migrant groups (and beyond) similar to the Italian one (Poggio and Whitehead 2017). Therefore, despite contingent differences among countries in terms of the characteristics of migration flows, housing systems and public policies (Arbaci 2019), it is plausible to assume that Italy shares some basic features of migrant housing precarity with other European countries.

## The migrant question in Italy, in the midst of the ‘refugee crisis’

Italy became an immigrant destination country quite recently, in the mid-1970s, with an upsurge in the 1990s. Today, it is home to many foreign migrants of diverse origins: Eastern Europe (e.g. Romania, Albania and Ukraine), Asia (e.g. China, India, Pakistan and Philippines) and Northern Africa (e.g. Morocco and Egypt) in particular. As of 1 January 2021, there were about 5,035,000 legal foreigners residing in Italy, representing 8.5% of the total population

(ISTAT 2021). This datum does not account for unauthorized immigrants who as of 2017 were estimated between 500,000 and 700,000 people (Blangiardo 2018).

Among migrants in Italy, refugees and asylum-seekers have been a historically negligible segment, in particular when compared to their numbers in nearby countries such as Germany, the UK and France (Ammendola et al. 2005). However, this situation changed recently. Between 2014–2020, Italy experienced an increase in incoming asylum-seekers. Approximately 700,000 people entered the country at this time, mainly via the Mediterranean; over 500,000 applied for asylum in Italy and about 198,000 were granted some form of protection (but only a portion of them remained in Italy; Basevi and Conti 2017). Of these asylum-seekers, the majority came from sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Nigeria), Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan (Ministero dell'Interno 2020).

In this regard, Italy has been (and still is) rather unprepared institutionally to handle migration flows. Overall, the Italian policy approach to immigration has been characterized, on the one hand, by uncoordinated measures focused in particular on regulating labor recruitment at the national level (Ambrosini 2015 and 2020) and, on the other hand, on leaving the remaining aspects of migrant inclusion at the discretion of and managed by local administrations and civil society organizations (Caponio 2010). In the past few years, regularization decrees in favor of illegal migrants and ordinary channels for entering for work reasons shrank or ceased. Simultaneously, emergency decrees framed in terms of national security became the main means to handle migration flows in general, and the question of asylum-seekers in particular (Russo Spina 2010). Such policy and regulative approach has contributed to making the living conditions of many migrants in Italy particularly tough (Aru 2021). This refers to several spheres of life, including housing – which represents an important indicator of (and prerequisite for) integration, stabilization and social inclusion (Tosi 2017).

The housing conditions of migrants in Italy are particularly complex. Two decades ago, Tosi (2001a) argued that, in Italy, ‘despite the great variety of conditions [...] the general picture is that of huge numbers of immigrants suffering housing hardship and exclusion. Many immigrants who are not poor are badly housed and ordinarily poor immigrants are often without housing’. Twenty years later, while the housing situations of some migrants have improved (for instance, thanks to their stabilization), many immigrants in Italy still suffer from harsh housing conditions (the situation further deteriorated in the aftermath of the 2007–8 global financial crisis; Poggio and Boreiko 2017). This difficult state of affairs is epitomized by a 2014 survey that estimated that 50,724 people were without shelter, of which 58 percent were foreigners (ISTAT 2015). Consider also that the number of migrants who own their own home is extremely low when compared to Italian citizens: in Italy, 76.5 percent of Italian households live in owner-occupied housing while this share drops to 27.9 percent for households with at least one foreign member (ISTAT 2018).<sup>1</sup>

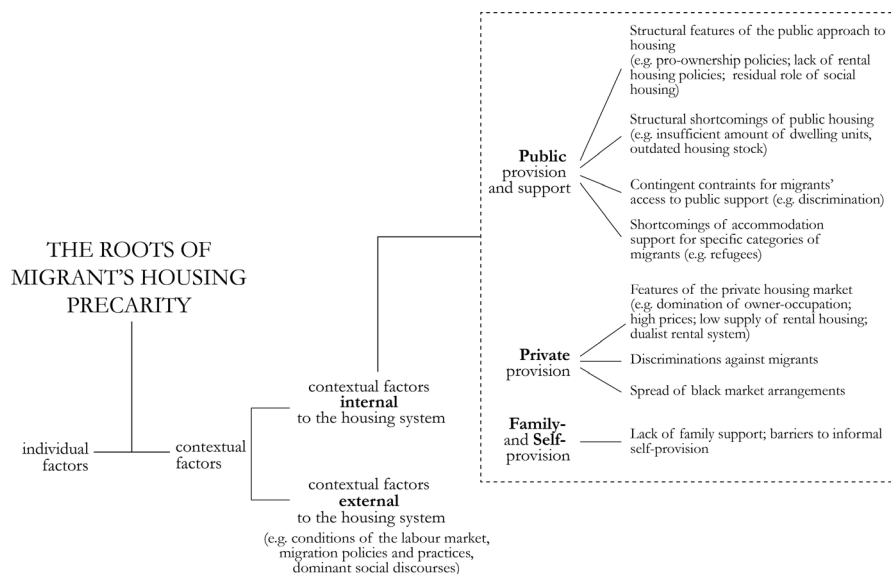
Migrants’ harsh housing conditions manifest in a variety of ways, including homelessness, living in emergency and transitional housing facilities provided by non-governmental organizations or public authorities, living at the workplace, staying with relatives or friends in overcrowded spaces, living in substandard housing structures, renting without a formal contract, or using a large portion of the salary to pay monthly rent (Shier et al. 2016). While these

diverse housing conditions are characterized by radically different features and problems, all exhibit the presence of shared *causes* that prevent many migrants from achieving housing stability.

Before moving on to the next section, it is worthwhile to provide a very brief introduction to the housing context in which this state of affairs is situated. Housing deprivation and insecurity are widespread social plagues in Italy, affecting not only migrants, but also the lower strata of Italian society. This is the result of a set of factors, among which an important role is played by the features of the Italian housing system (Allen et al. 2004; Arbaci 2007). The latter is characterized by some peculiarities that are crucial to understanding the difficult dwelling conditions of a portion of the Italian society – and of migrants in particular. First, the prevalence of ownership (it accounts for almost 80% of the housing stock) is coupled with a rental sector that is marked by severe problems of residuality, affordability and high rent premiums (Arbaci 2019). Second, the residual role of housing measures on behalf of public authorities. These residual measures are addressed only to the most vulnerable sectors of the population (e.g. the poor) and are confined to the supply of housing promoted directly by public authorities and assigned at very low rents to households that fulfill specific socio-economic criteria<sup>2</sup> (other measures, like rent-supplement schemes and social housing have always been marginal in Italy; Bargelli and Heitkamp 2017a). The provision of public housing, however, has never been able to adequately meet demand – today there are 650,000 households on municipal waiting lists for public housing (Federcasa 2016). Third, the central role of specific elements, namely family support (Poggio 2012) and self-promotion (often in the form of informal building; Chiodelli et al. 2021), in providing an answer to the structural problems of the Italian housing regime (e.g. questions of affordability).

## The roots of migrant housing precarity in Italy

The precarious housing situation of migrants in Italy is the result of the interaction of individual factors specific to each individual migrant (e.g. economic, human, and social capital) with the complex interplay of a series of structural arrangements (see Figure 1). These structural arrangements are diverse in nature. In many cases, they are not connected (i.e. they are external) to the housing system. This is the case, for example, of migration policies and laws (which shape migrants' legal status and the associated citizenship rights; see Ambrosini 2020 and Gargiulo 2020) and of dominant social discourses (which foster utilitarian, racialized and repressive attitudes; Arbaci 2019 and Oliveri 2018). Consider also the role of the labor market, whose conditions are crucial in determining the income of migrants and therefore their chances of accessing housing – as epitomized by the fact that the most common cause of immigrant eviction is rental arrears due to changes in employment status (IDOS 2016).<sup>3</sup> Although these factors which are *external* to the housing system play a key role in shaping indirectly migrants' housing precarity, the latter is also the *direct* result of the *internal* features of the housing system. How is migrant housing precarity defined and shaped by these internal features? In the rest



**Figure 1:** The roots of migrant housing precarity in Italy. Source: Authors' elaboration.

of this section, we answer this question focusing on two main pillars of the Italian housing system, namely public support/provision and market-based provision. The third pillar of housing access in Italy, namely family- and self-provision, in fact, is not active for migrants. Indeed, they cannot usually rely on family support to access accommodation – on the contrary, they often support relatives and family members economically in their home country (Dell'Olio 2004): 'I have to send money to my wife and my son, my sisters and brothers back home. If I spend about €300–€400 for a room, how can I? I get €700 per month which I receive in instalments.' (Rashidu, interview, May 2018) At the same time, illegal housing construction on agricultural land on the outskirts of the main cities – which from the 1950s to the 1970s played a key role in providing housing access for many domestic migrants (e.g. migrants from rural to urban areas, or from southern to northern regions) – ceased in the 1980s,<sup>4</sup> thus never benefitted international migrants (Arbaci 2019).

### **Public provision and support of migrant accommodation**

Italy lacks national legislation and policy specifically addressing immigrant housing needs (Dell'Olio 2004). This takes place within a context in which, in Italy as in several European countries, migrant integration measures do not include housing services and, in the few cases in which they consider dwelling issues, they are disconnected from traditional housing support (e.g. social or public housing) (Edgar, Doherty, and Meert 2004). On paper, legal migrants in Italy receive the same kind of assistance provided to Italians through the ordinary system of public housing, while asylum-seekers receive accommodation through the reception system.<sup>5</sup> Both situations, however, are dogged by numerous critical challenges.

**Public housing and accommodation support for legal migrants.** Public support for housing in Italy is, on the whole, inadequate to meet the needs of the entire national population, not only those of migrants. However, within this



framework, migrants are particularly disadvantaged, as testified by the fact that in 2014, while non-EU foreigner households inhabited 10.2 percent of the total public housing units, they represented 37.3 percent of the nuclear families on the waiting lists (EU-migrant households on the waiting lists made up an additional 8.2 percent of the total) (Federcasa 2016). This disproportionate number of migrants on the waiting lists is linked not only to the fact that the share of migrants who started to apply for access to public housing has grown a lot in the last two decades (simultaneously to a progressive reduction in public investments and to a privatization process of existing public housing units; Puccini 2016). It is also related to the structural characteristics of the public housing stock. In fact, many public flats are small in size and therefore cannot be assigned to large households, which represent a significant part of the households of migrants on the waiting lists (Federcasa 2016).

These problems are aggravated by the fact that many local authorities have introduced restrictive and discriminatory measures which limit migrant public housing access (Ambrosini 2013; Baldini and Poggio 2012; Cerretelli and Enwereuzor 2003; Tosi 2001b). For example, the Municipality of Milan adopted discriminatory eligibility procedures in their allocation system in 2002, favoring applicants in possession of Italian citizenship in the composition of access lists (Cerretelli and Enwereuzor 2003). These occasional cases of overt discrimination are complemented by other requirements that prevent or implicitly discourage migrants from applying for public housing. This is the case in Lombardy, where regional law dictates that an applicant for public housing must be registered as a legal resident, and/or must have carried out work in the Lombardy region for at least five consecutive years in the period preceding the date of application (Cerretelli and Enwereuzor 2003, 17; Dotsey and Lumley Sapanski 2021). The same requirement also referred to the access of other forms of regional support for housing, such as the 'rental fund' (*fondo affitti*; i.e. a financial contribution to the lease reserved for poor households). Far from being trivial, this requirement is a major constraint for many migrants:

*'I've been staying here on and off for the past 11 years but I'm not a resident [...]. I've been living in shared housing and emergency structures since I came. You see, if I'm hosted somewhere, they said hospitality is not accepted for residency. How can I have a residence without having a regular house and then ask for public housing?'* (Yarat, interview, May 2018)

More generally — and independent from cases of discrimination — the criteria for accessing public housing are preferential to households with dependents and elders. Therefore, they do not fit with the profile of a large portion of migrants who arrive in Italy alone and are of working age. While such criteria are reasonable from a general, allocative, viewpoint (i.e. they prioritize fragile groups), the lack of other forms of housing assistance for migrants with other demographic profiles further problematizes the difficult housing situation.

*'I went to the municipality several times, but nothing [...]. It's a common trend that if your wife and children aren't here, it's difficult to get public housing. I've worked for many years in this municipality, but my housing history over the years has been precarious. It's difficult for young individuals to access public housing [...].'* (Philip, interview, May 2018)

Difficulties in obtaining specific information compounds the aforementioned problems. In fact, many migrants do not know the public assistance system and the criteria for accessing it. This is linked not only to the migrants' knowledge deficit, but also to the limits of the bureaucratic system: almost all bureaucratic documents are available in Italian only and the complexity of the application procedures requires knowledge of different aspects of the local administrative environment.

*'I haven't changed my residence; I still have my residence in Parma until 2022. But can I change it before that date? I arrived in Bergamo in 2013 and have been here ever since.'*  
(Musah, interview, May 2018)

Although these problems linked to accessing information are highly evident, public authorities have rarely put in place specific actions to deal with them (when assistance is provided, it comes from NGOs).

***Accommodation support for asylum-seekers and refugees.*** In Italy, there is an extensive system of accommodation centers in which asylum-seekers and refugees are distributed. This system should, in theory, guarantee asylum-seekers and refugees adequate accommodation. Asylum-seekers are provided temporary shelter mainly in *Centri di accoglienza straordinaria* (CAS) while their claim is evaluated. CAS facilities are temporary structures that provide basic services while an asylum-seeker's claim is evaluated. Then, when a bed is available, refugees (households, unaccompanied minors, and people with health problems as a priority) are transferred to a secondary structure, within the framework of the System for the Protection of Asylum-seekers and Refugees (SPRAR), where they receive housing for 6–12 months.<sup>6</sup> The SPRAR system is considered best practice in refugee and asylum-seeker reception in Italy. SPRAR locations are distributed widely across the country, in agreement with local authorities, to facilitate migrant integration. They offer services designed to foster integration, including job training, language coursework and community mediation. Unfortunately, the system includes only a tiny minority of the total number of asylum-seekers due to the low number of available places. Moreover, despite being rather well-conceived and implemented, the SPRAR system does not prevent many migrants from falling into housing precarity once they leave. In fact, refugees spend time in the SPRAR system that is often too short to allow them to attain complete autonomy in terms of work and housing. This applies to a greater extent to migrants who cannot access the SPRAR system, thus remaining in the *Centri di accoglienza straordinaria*, where living conditions are usually quite tough and almost no service to facilitate integration is offered to migrants. Furthermore, in some cases, specific management problems or sudden changes of regulation or law force migrants to leave the asylum system without sufficient notice.

*'The organization informed me that in two days I'd have to leave [the CAS] camp. So, I went out and started sleeping outside. I asked them why now and why they didn't inform me much earlier. They told me they changed the law. They said if I didn't go, they'd call the police. I can't tell you how bad I felt.'* (Dzuglu, interview, July 2018)

In addition to this, the whole asylum system allocates asylum-seekers on a 'no-choice' basis (Dotsey and Lumley Sapanski 2021) and the majority of available places are located in southern Italy – while the large majority of job opportunities are offered by northern regions (Pesce 2017). The consequence is that, once refugees exit the asylum system, they usually relocate to new areas of the country and are forced to rebuild their networks from scratch to find work and a home.

These specific organizational and management characteristics of the asylum system are compounded by the public authorities' difficulty in communicating with many refugees. Many of them are unaware of their rights and the opportunities for assistance provided by public institutions.

*'I don't know how the reception system works, so I left the camp after the first week to go to other EU countries. And I now find myself without a place to stay'* (Abubakar, interview, July 2018)<sup>7</sup>

The fact that many asylum-seekers and refugees 'live rough', squat and utilize homeless services – with an estimated 10,000 protection holders and asylum-seekers believed to be residing outside the state's institutions or camps with no access to basic services – serves to further demonstrate the harsh dwelling condition experienced by refugees (EOH 2016; MSF 2018).

### **The private housing market**

The lack of adequate, migrant-focused housing support policies forces migrants to rely almost exclusively on the private *rental* market (see Dell'Olio 2004) – home ownership is quite rare among migrants and is reached only after several years in Italy. However, access to the private rental market is inherently problematic for anyone suffering from unstable working conditions and low income, due to its residuality and limited affordability (Arbaci 2019). The seriousness of migrant difficulties in the private rental market is highlighted by the fact that 25 percent of the evictions carried out due to arrears in the past five years (about 100,000 in total) involved immigrant households (CGIL-Sunia 2016). For migrants, access to the private rental system is even more difficult than for natives, not only because they tend to suffer from more difficult job conditions and poverty than the indigenous population, but also because they face discrimination and problems associated with their legal status that induce them to use the informal market.

**Discrimination.** Migrants can face problems accessing the private rental market due to prejudice and racism. Data show that the highest percentage of cases of perceived discrimination, within the context of migrants' daily lives, is related to the search for a home. According to a 2018 survey (ISTAT 2018), about 11 percent of migrants believed that they suffered discrimination in their housing search. Some landlords, in fact, refuse to rent to foreigners because of prejudice, including the fear that immigrants lack the means to pay rent or that they may create coexistence problems with neighbors, or simply due to racism (Baldini and Federici 2011; Coin 2004).

*'They refused to rent an apartment to me more than 20 times [...]. I searched for a house for a year in Bergamo [...]. It happens that I called the agency one day and they asked about my country of origin, and I said I'm from the Congo. If you aren't Italian, then no'* (Francois, interview, May 2018).

Furthermore, in some cases, landlords are unwilling to rent to foreigners at the normal market price, instead charging higher fees estimated at 10–20 percent higher than in the case of Italian tenants (Daminato and Kulic 2013). Others, as we explore below, rent to migrants, but without a proper legal contract.

**Illegal renting.** Illegal migrants cannot legally rent or buy a house. Consequently, illegality is an almost obligatory option for them to secure accommodation. In some cases, illegal migrants can resort to squatting – often through the support of social movements (Belloni, Fravega, and Giudici 2020; Bolzoni, Gargiulo, and Manocchi 2015; Nur and Sethman 2016; see several essays in Mudu and Chattopadhyay 2017 for cases in other European countries). Despite the political and social relevance of squatting, and although many occupations promoted by social movements have become a point of reference for many migrants (e.g. in terms of providing guidance and legal assistance; Grazioli 2021), squatting responds to the dwelling needs of a tiny percentage of migrants in a condition of housing distress. In other situations, migrants can opt for self-built informal settlements, usually in rural areas (Aru 2021; Cristaldi 2015). However, several factors can discourage migrants from these informal options: very low-quality dwelling conditions, repressive measures by public authorities, the criminal status of squatting and illegal building in the Italian legislation. Therefore, illegal renting is the main way to access housing for illegal migrants. However, illegal renting has several negative outcomes, such as exploitative prices, low housing quality and lack of legal recourse and rights associated with regular tenancy (Mazzucato 2007).

*'My South American landlord makes me pay too much. I pay €250 for a room, apart from the bills [...] so I pay almost €400 per month. The house is cold because he doesn't want to turn on the heating system. The house is old, almost abandoned [...]. I accepted this place because I didn't have any other choice.'* (Rufutus, interview, October 2018)

Not only must illegal migrants resort to illegal housing; so too must many legal migrants, due to the unavailability of other options (e.g. the impossibility to rent legally due to high prices). This has created a flourishing informal housing market involving migrants all around Italy. Although accurate and reliable data on this phenomenon are not available (academic research is also scant), according to SUNIA (2009) about 39 percent of migrants in Italy in 2009 had unregistered contracts.

## The epistemological lancet of housing precarity

For many migrants in Italy not only reaching housing stability through the purchase of a house is extremely challenging, but it is also very complicated to access the formal rental sector, whether public or private. The result is that many migrants are forced to change housing constantly, occupy low-quality or overcrowded living spaces, rent in the shadow market, or sleep on the street or in temporary structures made available by NGOs. Such a condition is the result of the complex assemblage of a series of factors, which differ in nature (e.g. economic, political, institutional) and scale (e.g. local, national, global),

among which the features of the housing system play a key role. Against this backdrop, which is extremely varied in terms of phenomenology, meanings and causes, the problem of a unitary and non-reductive conceptualization arises – which, for instance, avoids a simplistic association between housing problems and economic poverty, like in the case of the notion of housing deprivation. In this regard, the concept of precarity seems to be particularly useful. In fact, it allows to emphasize the centrality of political and institutional mechanisms in the production of migrant housing problems, while contextualizing such production within the broader framework of individual and contextual, local and global forces. At the same time, the concept of precarity enables us to transcend a certain passive and atomistic view of migrants, to highlight their agency and the potential of this condition as a ‘strategic point of departure for political subjectivities’ (Jørgensen 2016, 962).

### The concept of precarity

The term precarity derives from the Latin word *precarius*, which has its root in *prex*, prayer. *Precarius* therefore means ‘obtained through prayer’ and indicates a condition that does not last forever, existing only as long as the person who grants this condition wants (see Casas-Cortés 2014). Therefore, such a condition is a temporary concession, not a stable right.

The term gained traction in English-speaking academic and policy circles in the 1970s (Barbier 2002; Millar 2017) and proliferated in public and academic discourses during the 2000s in particular (Schierup and Jørgensen 2016), also thanks to the publication of the seminal 2011 book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* by Guy Standing (Paret and Gleeson 2016; for a critical reading of this book, see Millar 2017 and Jørgensen 2016). Despite this decades-long intellectual history, precarity still lacks conceptual clarity and a shared definition (Banki 2013), partly because of the ambiguities in its usage as a ‘mobilization tool’ or a ‘condition’ by those experiencing it (Waite 2009).

Before becoming widespread in academic discourse, precarity emerged as a mobilization tool employed by social justice movements and activists. The concept gained popularity in the early 2000s in Europe, as reflected in Milan’s MayDay 2001 protests and subsequent EuroMayDay mobilizations against labor and economic insecurity (Millar 2017; Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Standing 2011).<sup>8</sup> In this context, precarity is understood as identifying situations which have political potential and are possible reference points for mobilizing disparate groups that have been marginalized by neoliberal exploitation (Banki 2013; Waite 2009), but, despite this, are usually not represented (or even abandoned; Standing 2011) by traditional working-class organizations (e.g. trade unions).

Although this interpretation of precarity as a mobilization tool is widespread in social and political environments, in the academic discourse the concept of precarity is typically used to describe a socio-economic condition linked to labor market participation and associated with economic instability (Bourdieu 1998). Precarious work has been defined as ‘employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker’ (Kalleberg 2009, 2). This use of the term brings with it the idea that precarious work is a product of neoliberal reforms and globalization, which have eroded full-time job guarantees (Neilson and Rossiter 2008; some scholars have critiqued this

unilateral connection of precarity with neoliberalisation and globalization, such as Millar 2017; Paret and Gleeson 2016). [Precarity] serves an essential purpose in a disjointed political economy of neoliberal globalization within which the excluded are unsafe and vulnerable — but not superfluous' (Schierup and Jørgensen 2016, 948): according to this view, precarity is not a 'systemic error', an unintentional mistake, but a mode for providing the neoliberal economic system with an army of exploitable people, who are valuable exactly because they are vulnerable (Bauder 2006).

Though the dominant academic approaches to precarity tend to focus on economic and labor insecurity, there are interpretations that have expanded its use. The concept has been used to describe new affected social groups (e.g. precarious youth and academics; Means 2015 and Thorkelson 2016), new sources (e.g. insecurity and vulnerability in terms of legal status; Goldring, Berinstein, and Bernhard 2009) and new spheres of life (e.g. the inability to build affective social relations). Within this framework, precarity has become a sort of ontological experience (Butler 2004), whose peculiarity is that it 'connects the micro and the macro, situating experiences of insecurity and vulnerability within historically and geographically specific contexts' (Paret and Gleeson 2016, 280).

Against this background, we reckon precarity should be conceptualized as an existential condition of prolonged uncertainty and insecurity, across several core spheres of life. As such, precarity emerges at the crossroads of individual experiences and structural conditions, so that the notion 'incorporates the political and institutional context in which the *production* of precarity occurs, rather than focusing solely on individualized experiences' (Waite 2009, 421). Precarity is simultaneously an individual status (it affects individuals) and a collective condition (it refers to people who share similar states, for instance in terms of labor insecurity), thus being potentially a trigger for the emergence of political subjectivities. As such, the epistemological value of the concept of precarity rests on its emphasis of four entangled elements: i) the centrality of political and institutional production of precarity; ii) the intersection of personal attributes and structural forces, of local and global causes; iii) the understanding of sectoral problems (e.g. housing or labor problems) as part and parcel of an ontological condition of risk and uncertainty characterizing multiple aspects of daily lives; iv) the indication of precarity as a potential point of departure for a collective agency countering such condition, in particular among the disparate groups that, despite being marginalized by neoliberal exploitation, are not represented by traditional working class organizations.

### **Precarity as an analytical tool for migrant housing conditions**

The concept of precarity has been scarcely applied to the field of housing (with a few recent exceptions, such as Clair et al. 2019 and Lombard 2021). Nevertheless, its use in this domain – and, more specifically, in relation to migrant housing conditions – appears to be particularly valuable. In fact, as Lombard (2021, 5) encapsulates, 'precarity's ability to capture these aspects – lack of control and its affective dimension, multidimensionality and structure-agency dynamics – facilitates a deeper understanding of low-income migrant workers' experiences of housing'. Against this backdrop, the analytical relevance of the concept of

precarity in the field of migrant housing conditions can be more appreciated if we consider the four aforementioned epistemological keys.

*The centrality of its political and institutional production.* As emerged from our analysis of the Italian case, the housing precarity of migrants is deeply shaped and produced by various public institutions in the field of housing. This is attested by the fact that, while different legal statuses of migrants should *on paper* correspond to different housing conditions (e.g. legal migrants should be protected from housing precarity by public housing support), this is not the case *in practice*. Even legal migrants and migrants awaiting authorization suffer from a profound housing precarity, often in very similar ways as unauthorized migrants. This is not only because in Italy there are no housing policies aimed at addressing the specific problems of migrants (or of certain categories of migrants, such as refugees). It also happens because the public housing support system presents many shortcomings that, together with specific local practices (e.g. discrimination), push migrants into the difficult private housing market. Within this framework, it can be argued that migrant housing precarity is mostly (even if not only) produced and maintained by public institutions, at different levels (e.g. national, regional and local) and through different instruments (e.g. laws, regulations, policies and practices) (Coin 2004). Also, the shortcomings of the private rental market (such as a low supply of rental housing, high costs and widespread illegal renting) are directly linked to actions (e.g. the constant support for homeownership) or inactions (e.g. the lack of effective controls and sanctions on illegal renting) of the State across all levels. Such institutional production of migrants' housing precarity occurs within the framework of the bias and shortcomings of a (housing) welfare regime that is shaped exclusively by the needs and preferences of natives (Tosi 2017). At the same time, the housing precarity of migrants is maintained and reinforced by political intentions. In fact, it is seen as a tool to discourage migrant settlement and further inflows, as well as a source of political bargaining and consensus building (Coin 2004). This applies not only to xenophobic, nationalist and right-wing parties, but also to center-left wing parties, in an Italian political panorama which is aligned on the racialization and governmentalization of migrants' issues (Oliveri 2018) in the context of exclusionary policies and discourses against the poor and ethnic minorities (Chiodelli et al. 2021).

*The intersection of personal attributes and structural forces, of local and global causes.* The aforementioned institutional and political factors are central for the production and reproduction of the housing precarity of migrants. However, they are complemented by (and must be read within the framework of) other features of the host environment, external to the housing system (such as social perception of foreigners, features of the labor market and the welfare system, international political and economic situation), which contribute to shaping migrants' uncertainty and vulnerability. In the case of Italy, this picture is also the result of the lack of a coherent and structured approach to immigration, which is addressed in a fragmented, incoherent and episodic manner, mostly through emergency measures (Dotsey 2021). This exacerbates a condition of weakness and subordination inherent in the migration of low-income people in the current phase of globalization, in which migrants are seen not as subjects bearing inalienable rights, but as tools at the complete disposal of the economy.

All these elements interact in a complex way with individual characteristics (e.g. socio-demographic, biographic and human capital factors), thus shaping the various forms and degrees of housing precarity experienced by migrants. Put differently, the notion of precarity calls for the avoidance of any causal reductionism: while recognizing the centrality of certain contingent causal factors, these factors must be situated in a more comprehensive contextual framework, composed by the assemblage of elements which differ in scale, origin and nature.

*The understanding of sectoral problems as part and parcel of an ontological condition.* Just as the notion of precarity invites us to avoid any causal reductionism, it encourages us at the same time – and as a direct consequence of this – to avoid a discrete reading of migrant housing problems. Regardless of the specific characteristics of these housing problems, their impact on a migrant's life can only be understood within an overall framework of insecurity and risk which invades the entire life of a person. The analysis of the Italian case, for example, shows how housing precarity is not only fed by precarity in other spheres of life (e.g. job insecurity), but in turn contributes to increasing the ontological vulnerability and existential uncertainty of migrants.

*The potential emergence of political subjectivities.* Against the backdrop of our analysis of the varied causes of the housing precarity of migrants at multiple levels, it is clear that such a condition demands a structured, collective action to be countered effectively. Such an action could emerge, paradoxically, from the constitutive features of precarity, seen as an ontological condition of many subjects marginalized by the current economic and political system. Here is where a fourth epistemological dimension of the concept emerges: its potential as a trigger for the constitution of political subjectivities. As Jørgensen states, even if 'precarity does not necessarily designate a common cause (nor a class-in-the-making), [...] it *can* function as a social space in which struggles are articulated and united' (2016, 967). In other words, the condition of precarity can trace an explicit – conceptual, emotional, material and political – connection between migrants and other subaltern subjects who live in a similar prolonged situation of instability, uncertainty and risk (e.g. precarious workers of platform capitalism). Compared to the latter, migrants represent a sort of hyper-case, 'the quintessential incarnation of precarity' (Schierup and Jørgensen 2016, 949). This extreme state of precarity challenges the possibility of migrants being political agents of transformation. While some authors downplay their role in political and social struggles (see Standing 2011), according to other scholars (see Casas-Cortés 2009), the migrant precariat can have a central role in renewed political mobilization. A series of struggles of precarious migrants in some cities (see, for instance: Kotronaki, Lafazani, and Maniatis 2018; Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, and Tsianos 2016) supports this thesis. Without entering into this debate on the actual potential of 'precarized' migrants to become active agents of change, we confine ourselves here to highlighting two relevant questions that emerge from our analysis of housing precarity: can housing become a way not only to stimulate the political engagement of migrants, but also to unify different subgroups of the contemporary precariat? How much are the factual differences in the housing situations of different precarious subgroups an obstacle to such political mobilization (for instance, precarious natives seem to live in less



harsh housing conditions than immigrants in Italy, thanks to family support or residual welfare state protections)? Answering these questions is fundamental to our understanding of whether housing precarity can function as a point of departure for the production of new political subjectivities and struggles.

## Post-scriptum by way of conclusion: migrant housing precarity in times of COVID-19

This paper was conceived and written before the onset of the COVID-19 crisis in Italy. Although there is still no empirical evidence, it is likely that the lockdown measures taken to contain the spread of the virus have significantly exacerbated the housing precarity problems described in the paper. Moreover, the support and mitigation policies put in place by public authorities in Italy have addressed housing issues to a very limited extent and, once again, have focused almost exclusively on landlords (this is the case of tax relief for energy performance improvement measures or for freezing mortgage payments) (Chiodelli 2020). Simultaneously, the government has not taken into account the problems of those who work or have rented their homes without a regular contract. Therefore, the housing situation of tens of thousands of both legal and illegal immigrants in Italy will be even more dramatic in the coming months and years. Academic research is urgently needed to investigate how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted migrant housing precarity in order to suggest possible strategies for action.

It is also against this background that this paper aims at contributing to the opening of a debate on these issues (and on some specific empirical aspects still little explored, among which are migrants' illegal renting and post-pandemic migrants' housing situations), whose social relevance is blatant. Following the analysis of the institutional roots of migrants' housing precarity in Italy, this paper has suggested the relevance of mobilizing the concept of precarity when investigating these issues. The use of this concept, in fact, allows to underline the political-institutional production of migrants' housing precarity, contextualizing this production within the framework of diverse and multiple structural and individual factors. In doing so, this concept not only connects precarity in the housing sphere to precarity in other domains of migrants' everyday existence, but also alludes to the transformative (political) potential of this condition. In short, the concept of precarity, articulated in the four declinations identified, seems to be an epistemological lancet extremely useful for dissecting migrants' housing precarity, in Italy and beyond – in pandemic times and beyond.

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## Notes

- 1 There are significant differences among migrant subgroups. For instance, Chinese households tend to live in their own homes more often than others (on average about a third of the households). Filipinos, on the other hand, are less often the owners of the house in which they live (just 12.1 percent), since, being mostly specialized in the professions of care and personal assistance, they are often employed full time directly in the home of their employers and live there (ISTAT 2018).
- 2 Access to public housing occurs through rankings compiled at a municipal level, which prioritizes the more disadvantaged households.
- 3 Working conditions impact on housing insecurity in a second way: they affect the legal status of migrants and, consequently, their ability to access certain forms of housing (e.g., migrants without a regular residence permit cannot rent accommodation in a legal way).
- 4 What ceased in the 1980s is illegal building on agricultural land by the poor, in the framework of intense domestic migrations. However, the overall phenomenon of illegal housing (e.g., second homes built by middle-income groups) did not stop. See Chioldelli (2019) and Chioldelli et al. (2021) for an overview on illegal housing in Italy.
- 5 See Legislative Decree 25 July 1998, no. 286, article 40 (available at: <https://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi/deleghe/98286dl.htm>)
- 6 In December 2108, the SPRAR system was abolished by the right-wing government. Later, in 2020, it was reintroduced by the following centre-left wing government and it is currently still in place.
- 7 If a migrant leaves the accommodation center without a formal request (e.g., for medical reasons), s/he loses his/her place.
- 8 Milan's MayDay parade was a political parade organized from 2001 until about 2015 in Milan by a network of political and social actors of the radical left (e.g., squatted social centres, radical left parties, grassroots trade unions). It was born in

opposition to the demonstration of the confederal trade unions on Labour Day, with the aim of giving voice and visibility to the subjects of precarious work. It has always seen a wide participation (several tens of thousands of people), especially young people. On the wave of the success of the MayDay Parade in Milan, a European network was created in 2004, which replicated the event in several European cities (e.g., Barcelona, Paris, Berlin, Vienna).

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