

# Performativity and grassroots politics: On the practice of reshuffling mafia power

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## Abstract

Recent uses of performativity have been engaged with bridging the gap between the economy and politics. The concept of performance has for instance been used to enable discursive and material assemblages that challenge this dichotomy, with the general aim of transforming the economy. While the overall intent of this article is to contribute to this bridging, its direction of travel is the opposite: to bring the economy into politics. Specifically, it situates the notion of performativity within studies on grassroots politics in a material sense. First, it discusses some of the leading scholarship on grassroots movements, focusing on their take on the economy. It moves on to suggest that some of the problems that are identified can be addressed using performativity theory, the benefits of which are discussed in the second part. Finally, it empirically illustrates the theoretical discussion by analysing the performativity of the discourses, things and people that are jointly fighting the Mafia today. The article places social movement studies in dialogue with scholarship which is preoccupied with the economic-political cleft, in order to encourage thinking of the economy as a space for political possibility and social struggle, rather than seeing it as a place of capitalocentrism, structural exploitation and inescapability.

**Keywords:** Materiality; social movements; performativity; assemblage; grassroots politics

## Introduction

Let's kill them all and start anew. At least something will happen. There is nothing worse than living in this time of nothingness. I kind of wish for war to return, at least I would have something to run from. (Francesco, personal communication, May 2014<sup>1</sup>)

As a young Italian I was surrounded by a stagnant environment in 2011 and the pervasive idea that there was no way forward except leaving the country, which is what I did. My desire to reconnect with my networks, however, remained alive and I began to search for employment opportunities. The public sector was depressed: split between facing austere cuts and loaded with the burden of employing those who could not find work in the private sector. My entrepreneurial acquaintances were instead faced with heightened taxes and were almost unable to make ends meet. The public discourse was laden with notions of corruption, mafia and 'State theft'; populism was at its peak with the birth of the 5 Star Movement<sup>2</sup> and revolutionary injunctions such as the one cited above were not uncommon. Many seemed to be waiting for an event that never occurred.

In the midst of this pessimistic turmoil, it occurred to me that a lot of 'uneventful' revolutions were actually taking place. It happened in a supermarket; I was browsing the shelves for some pasta, when I found a package which had been produced on land that had been confiscated from the mafia. '*Libera terra*' (free land) it read. Through this object I began to investigate the contemporary struggle against the mafia, corruption, passive acceptance (*omertà*) and the overall attitude of 'waiting for the revolution'. It turned out that there was a great deal of work being carried out all over Italy that was creating jobs, strengthening markets and individuals who were opposing the mafia. Social movement organisations, institutions, students, religious groups, consumer networks, environmentalists, tourists and volunteers were, and are, working together to shape an anti-mafia economy, an anti-mafia politics.

My own experience with this object was what effectively opened up new realities for me and led me to seek out literature that would help me explain and make sense of what I was observing. I began by trying to elucidate the political nature of the grassroots economy I observed, turning to scholarship that dealt with grassroots politics and its engagement with the economy. The most obvious starting point was the field of political economy. However, its prevalently institutional take on politics pushed me to look elsewhere: literature on social movements and collective action. I soon found that

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<sup>1</sup> The direct quotations that follow come from my ongoing fieldwork in Sicily, Apulia, Campania and Emilia Romagna (Italy). I have been using participant observation methods and recorded several discussions between activists, as well as with myself, in the contexts of *libera*, *addio pizzo*, and 12 anti-mafia social cooperatives. The translations are my own and the names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> The 5 Star Movement is an anti-establishment party founded in 2009 by comedian Beppe Grillo.

although numerous studies were being produced on collective action that was manifesting some form of dissent towards structural aspects of the economy (given the recent crisis), there seemed to be an essential dualism between the economy and politics. The economy is, in other words, often treated as something outside of politics; a monolith that travels on a track parallel to politics. It is either something that *allows* for grassroots politics to happen or something that needs to be contested *by* politics. Both these approaches separate the two realms by placing them in a hierarchical position to one another. At this point I asked myself: how can we talk of activism that *does* politics *through* the economy without limiting ourselves to either one of these directions<sup>3</sup>? Does the deficiency of alternatives within the literature mirror a scarcity of historical precedents? In other words, does doing politics through the economy constitute a new avenue for mobilisation per se?

The politics-economy dichotomy has come to the attention of various thinkers who lie outside the field of social movement studies (Cochoy et al. 2010) and have a more cultural take on both categories. Building critically on the economic anthropology of Polyani, Michel Callon (1998) has for instance looked at how the economy is actually shaped by economic theory, pointing out that discourse and its material counterparts have the power to ontologically shape markets. His work, which has been well received in economic and market theory (MacKenzie et al. 2007), has led to bringing constructivism back into the economy, generating important discussions on agency. Being informed by Science and Technology Studies (STS), his work has been interested in the idea of material performativity, which he describes with the term ‘performance’. Performance is the material counterpart of a discourse, the sociotechnical arrangements that enact a statement, that make it ‘real’ (2007)<sup>4</sup>.

Given that my own experience with my object of study, the anti-mafia movement, began with a sociotechnical arrangement (a pack of mafia-free pasta) that made political possibilities come to life, I followed this concept beyond the social sciences and found that it had woven itself into the interests of cultural geographers working with alternative economies (Roelvink et al. 2015). Their latest anthology falls under an action research agenda, which seeks to promote different economic worlds that challenge capitalocentric conceptions of the economy. In other words their project is one that tries to bring politics into the economy, in order to ‘take back the economy’ (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013) and

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<sup>3</sup> As I am not endowed with Derridian creativity, throughout the paper I partially enter this discursive split (economy-politics) with my own utterance. In order to criticise language exercising, one has to enter the discourse that is being exercised.

<sup>4</sup> A political example of this could be the erection of the Hungarian border barrier which is the material counterpart of the discursive securitization of the refugee crisis. The construction of the wall is the performance of the nation-State, which materially separates and protects ‘us’ from ‘them’.

transform its ethics. For this agenda, performativity is about enabling new discursive and material assemblages in order to break the dichotomy between politics and the economy, with the aim of transforming the economy.

While the overall intent of this article is to contribute to this bridging, its direction of travel will be the opposite: to bring the economy into politics. Specifically, I aim to situate the notion of performativity within studies on social movements in a material sense<sup>5</sup>. The article unfolds as follows: first I discuss some of the leading scholarship that has dealt with grassroots politics, focusing on their relationship to the economy. I go on to suggest that the problems that are here identified can be addressed using performativity theory, the benefits of which I discuss in the second part, where I situate it within the field in a material sense. This allows me to describe a particular type of activism, the anti-mafia, which I use in the final part of the paper to put some flesh on the bones of the theoretical discussion. Moreover, the argument shows how performativity can be used to analyse the many emerging forms of political economies. By placing studies on grassroots politics in dialogue with other disciplines that are discussing this economic-political cleft, it is possible to establish a foundation for thinking of grassroots actors as economic agents and the economy as a place where social struggles can (and already do) take place. In other words, this paper seeks to encourage thinking of the economy as a space for political possibility and social struggle (Roelvink et al. 2015) rather than seeing it with essentialist lenses as a place of capitalocentrism, structural exploitation, and inescapability (Gibson-Graham 1996).

### **Grassroots politics and the economy**

In his recent book, Touraine warns us about the severe consequences of the financial crisis on the social body (2014), describing a split between the economic system and the social system in its entirety. Indeed the past decade has seen these worries reflected in different forms of activism worldwide. The Occupy protests were directed at the workings of the financial system and questioned its effects on wealth distribution. The anti-austerity protests around Europe question the power of public and private bodies in relation to national debt. Farmers and consumers from various countries including Burkina Faso, Senegal, Mauritania and Morocco rioted over the spike in food prices in 2007-2008, highlighting the vulnerability of lower income countries in the increasingly distorted global food market. Yet while these classical examples of social movements have been directed at

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<sup>5</sup> Here, I refer to the broader study of non-institutional politics and not only the Social Movement tradition specifically.

institutions and corporations, crying out for changes in power distributions, other forms of protest have been directly changing power distributions through action.

Anonymous have for instance tackled anti-piracy and copyright alliances, contending their right to privatise commons by effectively shutting down websites for days<sup>6</sup>. Other groups concerned with the way we produce and consume food are reframing waste as a source of nutrition, as is the case of dumpster-divers, or are avoiding animal cruelty through their consumption, in the case of vegans. Solidarity economies in Latin America have been challenging the way resources are allocated and managed through community driven practices. Permaculture and other forms of agro-ecological technologies are alternative responses to intensive farming practices, and are for instance being implemented by the MST in Brazil.

While veganism, solidarity economies, agro-ecological enterprises and Anonymous have little in common, and might not even be considered social movements by the leading schools of thought, they do, nonetheless, represent different ways of doing politics outside institutional realms and with varying degrees of formal organisation. Yet studies dedicated to these less visible forms of mobilization are scarce, as the majority of research dedicated to non-institutional politics focuses on highly organised forms of contention that culminate in public demonstrations of dissent (Haenfler et al 2012; Yates 2015a). However, several scholars have suggested looking beyond the category of social movement organisations (Snow 2004; Staggenborg & Taylor 2005) and instead exploring less manifest instances of 'ideologically structured action' (Zald 2000). The above instances exemplify these suggestions, as they express direct embodiments of objections to the way resources are allocated and governed without necessarily manifesting their dissent in protest events. Most importantly, these are all examples of grassroots politics that materially contend the way we conceive of and produce economic value: whether through an organisation, a particular lifestyle, the implementation of a novel technology, or a frontal attack on monopolies.

A research area that has focused on many of these issues is the study of political consumerism. While the field developed around the study of 'the consumer', relegating political agency to the individual acts of purchase, contemporary debates are gradually shifting towards more collective and critical understandings of these political economies (Jacobsen and Dulsrud 2007; Barnett et al 2010; Lewis and Potter 2011). Recent discussions seem, in fact, to be pointing towards the necessity to broaden our understanding of both consumption and mobilization, opening up a much needed space

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<sup>6</sup> In 2010, Anonymous DDoS-attacked several anti-piracy groups as a form of retaliation for trying to shut down Pirate Bay and similar sites.

of dialogue between these fields (Haenfler et al. 2012; Waehlen and Lahmanen 2015; Yates 2015a). These thoughts point to the need to move beyond neoclassical economics and its objective understandings of value and utility. They highlight how the act of consumption is part of a wider process of political valuation (Muniesa 2012).

The need for studies on consumption and everyday politics to ‘speak up’ for their object of enquiry as being fit to be classified as a form of mobilisation is, in my view, linked to the predominance of essentialist understandings of the economy (and consequentially, politics) within studies on grassroots politics. This is problematic for a topic as hybrid and dynamic as social practice, particularly in a time where international political bodies regulate toothpaste formulas, and in which it is possible to crowdfund healthcare for poor families. In what follows, I highlight a few key examples of the most dominant positions within the field.

Studies on grassroots politics can be dated back to late nineteenth century thinkers such as Le Bon and Tarde who were concerned with collective behaviour, particularly in the form of crowds. As Borch shows (2012), the passage from collective behaviour to social movement studies was connected to a desire to rid social theory of the irrational associations that the term collective behaviour entailed. This coincided with the success of Durkheimian sociology, which was more inclined to rationalist and linear thinking, leading studies away from amorphous and disorganised collective behaviour. As a result of this, social movements became a separate field of enquiry that is in some way dependant on the degree of intentionality of the group members (Blumer 1951).

Some schools within this tradition are of structuralist imprint, such as the Political Process (or opportunity) model (PP) (Tilly 1981, Tarrow 1989, McAdam 1982). These study collective action in relation to macro structures, seeing them as the extensions of traditional political participation mechanisms. Social movements thereby express the conflicting social interests, and are at once results of- and influential in- institutional politics (Tilly and Tarrow 2006). Unsurprisingly, the economy is also discussed in relation to institutional politics and democratic distribution. Della Porta’s recent work is exemplary of this line of thought (2015). She rightly notes how capitalism has been ignored by contemporary social movement studies, and brings forward an analysis on the relationship between demonstrations and the neoliberal structures that they stem from. This understanding of the economy is therefore primarily concerned with macro-structures; it is the structural nature of capitalism (neoliberal policies) that originates its opposition (protest events). Social movements are thus on the receiving end of a system, and represent their grievances by publicly expressing them. The agency of the movement is relegated to its ability to demonstrate, to mobilise in order to publicly manifest its

claims that should then be taken into account by institutions. Thereby, the movement is essentially an engaged victim of an economic structure, and it is because the structure produces problematic social consequences that the economic becomes a political issue.

A related paradigm is Resource Mobilization theory, which sprung directly out of economic thinking. Mancur Olson (1965) brought attention to the fact that people mobilise to maximise their personal utility and not necessarily to forward other people's interests. This led to the application of the neoclassical paradigm of marginal utility to the study of all collective action. As this made it difficult to explain why people did mobilise for interests that were beyond their own 'utility', studies began to focus on the organisational aspects of mobilisation and how social movement organisations (SMO) could in some way guarantee mobilisation (McCarthy and Zald 1977). While their interpretation of resources is reasonably broad, their primary interest was organisational, concerned with how efficiently one could allocate resources to motivate and allow for individuals to mobilise. Politics is essentially the process of acquiring access to and control over resources, which is facilitated by the entrepreneurial skills of a SMO. It is a political economy of rational maximisation of utility.

This approach received numerous critiques for its business-like tones, particularly because it emerged at a time where both utilitarianism and structuralism were declining in popularity. The 1980s were in fact the breeding ground for cultural and constructivist approaches for studies on collective action.

In Europe, as a reaction to the weakening of labour unions and the overall transformation of labour and production, there was a need for a new narrative that could replace class politics. This led to the establishment of the New Social Movement (NSM) paradigm that turned away from economic matters and drew instead on culture to explain what animates social protest. This approach underlined the emergence of new, non-class based *values* in order to represent social and political conflicts that could no longer be voiced by labour unions (gender, environment, human rights etc.). Exponents of this school of thought such as Touraine (1981), Offe (1985), and Melucci (1989), highlighted how social struggle is increasingly animated by identity, cultural and emotional needs, rather than class conflicts. In fact this paradigm is often referred to as being post-materialistic (Inglehart 1977). Yet it takes the economy, and particularly the fulfilment of a certain level of economic security as a prerequisite for the transformation of the nature of protest, thereby reflecting its Marxist heritage: politics and culture are superstructures. Namely, it is because western societies have reached a certain level of wealth that people have turned to other non-materialistic matters.

The cultural turn within European<sup>7</sup> social movement studies can be seen as having replaced the idea of class consciousness with that of collective identity (Maheu 1996), as its very foundational category (culture) is a product of an analysis which is steeped in historical materialism. Of course, this is a genealogical observation, and does not by any means characterise all NSM thinking. Nonetheless, the fact that this split occurred around materialistic issues has led a great deal of work that is based on categories such as culture and identity to ignore resources-based politics and questions on the economy (Hetland and Goodwin 2013), as if the economy were not a cultural matter.

As I have briefly sketched, since the social movement paradigm was affirmed around the 1960s as a reaction to irrational streams of thought,<sup>8</sup> a parallel movement to rationalise and theoretically separate the political, the economic and the cultural realms has taken place. The PP model has, in a sense, ‘institutionalised’ the economy, by prioritising analyses of protest events that are aimed at structural reforms, thereby making institutions the holders of economic agency. RM scholars have instead ‘economised’ the social, by applying neoclassical conceptions of value to the social movement ‘industry’. NSM studies and cultural constructivists have deflected from materialistic concerns as well as institutional ones as a result of these tendencies. Nonetheless, exponents of all these approaches (Zald 2000, Goodwin and Jasper 2004, Della Porta 2015) have, in different ways, pointed to the need to challenge many of these separations and construct a more fluid view of the political. Indeed dichotomous and binary conceptualizations cannot fully grasp the complexity of certain current forms of activism, as ‘(...) what we need precisely are a new set of transversal categories and forms of thought that elude both dualism and determinism’ (Butler 2013:43).

In the following, I propose to turn to performativity theory as a way out of some of these issues. This tradition is one that can shine light on the objects that are mobilized by activists. Here, I look closer at what performativity means, and discuss some examples of its theorisation in relation to collective action.

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<sup>7</sup> North American constructivist approaches on the other hand seem to be more of a reaction to institutional approaches, and thus often look at movements that are not directed at institutions but that challenge symbols, identities and cultural norms (Goodwin and Jasper 2004). Again there is a dichotomy similar to the politics-economy one: social movements are either looked at as prosthetic to State politics or as outside State politics.

<sup>8</sup> See Borch for a rigorous historical analysis (2012).



## Performativity and grassroots politics

Performativity theory originated from linguistic philosophy with Austin's famous idea of the 'speech act' (1962). His effort was to counter positivistic thinking that focused primarily on the descriptive, representational aspects of language. Through his work he showed how language and spoken utterances actually had the power to generate new social realities and could potentially produce ontological effects. Since Austin, performativity has been taken on by various disciplines and has spurred rich debates within literary (Searle 1969), social (Bourdieu 1982), economic (Callon 1998) and cultural studies (Butler 1988). For the purpose of this paper I have selected some of the most (in my view) fruitful uses of the term in relation to grassroots politics, namely Butler's (2010), Bradley's (2012) and Albrow's (1996).

In a brilliant article on performativity and agency, Judith Butler (2010) analysed how the term has been used in these various disciplines highlighting the different ways in which the original Austinian theorisation has been taken apart and selectively expanded by different traditions. One of her central concerns was that performativity theory is being used over-optimistically by the social sciences, which are generally concerned with breaking down the metaphysical category of 'the economy' and showing instead how economic theory shapes the market. While their merit is that of bringing back constructivism into the economy, their limit according to Butler, is believing that 'it works', that economic theory always has some sort of ontological effect. Given that their position focuses primarily on showing that the economy is constructed, it prioritises instances of success. It sees failure and rupture as something which *can* happen rather than something that is structural to performativity. By instead recognizing that rupture and failure are inherently *always* part of performativity, it is possible to be critical, to constantly question what it is that we are trying to reiterate. Failure also reminds us that we cannot always, infinitely create new realities, but that instead we should work on modifying existing ones. This idea pushes the agent to recognise the micro-ruptures, the minuscule facades that are subject to critique. It entails a normative positioning, that asks why as well as how.

To highlight her concern, Butler aptly reminded us of the original Austinian distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary performatives. The first generates new realities and thus is characterized by the sovereignty of the subject who performs the utterance (for instance when a priest declares a couple 'man and wife' it immediately follows that the couple is wed, however, this act would not have the same effect if it were pronounced by say, a supermarket cashier). The second type of performative also has the potential to bring into life new effects, but it is dependent on many other

variables for its success (for instance if a man told a woman he loved her this could change their relationship, however, this is dependent on how this was said, when and where it was uttered, and how the woman felt about the man, just to mention a few complications). According to Butler it is this second understanding of performativity, the perlocutionary, which is particularly rich for economic and political analyses. This is, of course, the case if one wants to highlight and forward critical instances of rupture rather than halting one's attention to hermeneutic readings of economic politics.

Essentially, what makes performativity interesting for this context is that it implies some sort of critique of the subject (Butler 2010). In its general usage, it breaks down metaphysical categories (such as, for instance, gender/the economy) by investigating the processes that lead to their naturalisation. Yet it also bears the potential to identify and potentially challenge the subject of the utterance (whether this be expressed in a social practice or a certain discourse). This critical soul is that which makes performativity particularly relevant for the study of contentious political action.

A paper by Quintin Bradley (2012) demonstrates this well. The author's work made an insightful empirical study of the English tenants' movement, drawing directly from Butler's work (1997, 2000). As he claims to have originated the term 'performative social movement', it is a significant starting point.

His paper analysed how it is possible to perform a contentious politics within a setting that is regulatory and which domesticates a social movement. The urban movement that he observed is, in fact, one co-opted by the government, in the sense that it moves within the boundaries of institutions rather than being autonomous from them in its contentious practices. The data he brought forward focuses on the discourse of participation (and the consequent practice of participating) in the tenants' organisations, and how it brings forward the imagination of a contentious politics. For instance Bradley looked at how talking about having rights to social housing reaffirms a legacy to a past movement, bringing individuals to establish a sense of shared interest and collective identity (Melucci 1989). He argued that although the movement is 'enveloped' in top-down policies of collaborative governance, the ritual of participating actually brings about discussions that create a belief in the performative power of voice, thereby constructing the social relations that are named in the process.

Summoning Butler (1993:2), Bradley explains that a performative social movement 'denotes the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains'. It can be concluded that Bradley's primary focus is on the speech acts that are produced in his case-study, thus relating to the original Austinian thesis that links performativity to a speaking subject (1962). While

this is an important contribution to social movement theory, it does not bring us closer to the object of this paper, which is to highlight the power of material assemblages (thus not solely spoken utterances) that challenge a status quo.

British sociologist Martin Albrow, on the other hand, takes a less discursive approach. Other than Butler's own work on gendered activism, his ideas are perhaps one of the earliest couplings of the term performative to the category of social movements. In 1996, he discussed the movements of the 'Global Age' as having some form of performativity. In his book, he theorised a postmodern world State which is the direct result of the decoupling of the idea of nation from the idea of State. This new (potential) world State is no longer the sole detainer of the classical nation-State triad of monopoly of violence, territorial control and welfare provisioning. In the world State it is in fact the global citizens who, due to centuries of 'State colonization' exercised through civic education and bureaucratization are now capable of and are already *performing* the State directly. Performative citizenship, Albrow argues, is one of transnational proportion, where individuals and collectives are directly acting for causes that are global: 'the global movements of today retain their independence from nation-States and even begin to negotiate with them almost as equal partners' (1996, 177).

As noted, Albrow's use of performativity is not particularly concerned with discursive matters but rather with particular political practices (such as advocacy, law-abidance, activist networking etc.). In fact he does not engage with performativity theory, using the term directly to describe the political transformation that is the object of his work. He does not use it in the illocutionary sense most traditionally associated with Austin's speech acts. Instead he treats performativity itself as an *effect* of a present lack of State, but most importantly, of a long history of civic inculcations which have led citizens to a certain level of self-governance:

In an important sense they are actually *performing the state*, creating it through the practices they have learned as the colonized and skilful citizens of the nation-state. This is where the penetration of the modern state into the everyday lives has prepared its citizens for a new and pro-active role (*ibidem*).

In this sense, performativity is not particularly 'critical'; it is not focused on the bringing forth the ruptures implied in the processes of construction or deconstruction, nor is it connected to the opposition of a subject. The agency of the citizen is a mere residue of that of the State. It is in fact the civic (through bureaucratic technology, education, modern State theory) that is here agentic, whereas the citizen is the repetitive body that reinforces its norms somewhat passively. While it could be interesting to view this performative politics from the point of view of the citizen, particularly by

questioning how individual and collective practices are challenging State politics, this is not Albrow's central concern. Indeed, while his view to a degree resonates with Foucault's ideas on governmentality (2008), Albrow is not interested in opposition; the enactment of the State is a result of other structural fallacies, which is what preoccupies him the most. Here we are dealing with a perlocutionary type of performativity, where the act of performance is less independent than in the illocutionary type, as its effect depends on other circumstances: it is interdependent rather than sovereign.

In conclusion, Albrow's idea of performative citizenship allows us to move beyond speech acts and towards the embodied practices of social movements. Furthermore, in his usage, performativity is tightly linked to structural issues, while Bradley's performative speech acts are more sovereign. Yet if, like Butler, one seeks to highlight the micro-practices of dissent- where it is that these moments of rupture occur and can occur- rather than limiting oneself to reading the structural transformations that have led to these possibilities, it is amid these positions that one need turn. It is in the assemblage of discourse and practice, of structures and their rearrangements, that one can find the potential for critique, and the possibility of collapsing the divide between the realms of politics and economy.

### **Performing the anti-mafia: reshuffling mafia power**

In order to unpack the concept of performativity in a material sense, a contextual premise is necessary. As it was an object, a fragment of a socio-technical assemblage, which opened up new realities and questions for me, it is apt to start from the same object to open up for different understandings of performative movements.

The package of pasta I found on the shelf of that supermarket is produced by a brand named *Libera Terra*. This brand represents a union of cooperatives around Italy that are farming on assets that have been confiscated from the mafia, by the Italian State. The brand is part of a larger umbrella association, *Libera*, which unites about 1600 organizations that are dedicated to countering the mafia in one way or another. In 1995 *Libera* initiated a massive civil society petition that led to the enforcement of the 109/96 law. This law deeply transformed anti-mafia legislation; it allowed for the social use of goods that are confiscated from criminal associations. In other words it allowed cooperatives to manage ~~(though not acquire)~~ the assets that had previously remained in the hands of the State, but lost their value due to the inefficient management. This brought two important mind-set changes: firstly, it formally recognised grassroots movements as anti-mafia actors; and secondly, it acknowledged the social and economic approach to anti-mafia struggles.

Before the 109/96 law was enforced, Italian anti-mafia legislation has been chiefly characterised by emergency laws, which have a narrow view of the phenomenon and are primarily penal in nature. However, the mafia is a much broader problem which is intimately economic (Arlacchi 1983; Catanzaro 1988; Gambetta 1992). Since its birth, the mafia has acted as a political entrepreneur, guaranteeing personal, political and economic security through protective (though violent) practices such as racketeering, client relations and exchange votes. Given the current levels of unemployment in Italy, the black market is a potential and real alternative for many.

The 109/96 law is a *téchne*: a discourse whose material counterpart (its performance, in Callon's terms) is shifting the power relations that control businesses, agricultural lands and real estate assets. However, the effects of this law go beyond the reutilisation of these assets. Since its enforcement there has been an expansion in terms of the types of actors and activities that counter the mafia. Indeed the semantic field associated with the mafia has witnessed an expansion (Jerne 2015). In order to share this development with readers who are not familiar with the anti-mafia movement, a succinct (and simplified) 150 year detour in mafia history is required, as the struggle against the mafia is not of recent birth (Santino 2011, 59).

The anti-mafia movement emerged more or less contemporaneously with the mafia itself: with establishment of the Italian State (Lupo 2004). From the mid-nineteenth century to the 1950s, the economy of southern Italy was largely agrarian, so the mafia was mainly active in the primary sector, administering the aristocracy's land and mediating the newly born relationships between the centre and the periphery of the State. In this phase, the anti-mafia took on the shoes of the *Fasci Siciliani*, the Sicilian Workers' Leagues, marching for labour rights and contesting the power relationships which dominated nineteenth century Sicily. In this phase labour unions and political parties were an important channel for these claims; however, they were also accompanied by spontaneous entrepreneurial activities such as collective rentals<sup>9</sup>. These enterprises were precursors to today's social cooperatives and were aimed at eliminating the intermediation of the *gabelotti*, which were the mafia tenants who administered the aristocracy's land<sup>10</sup>. The agrarian mafia and the newly unified State repressed these initiatives on various occasions; further, although the workers' movement grew stronger in consensus and achieved some legislative progress, the movement began to lose its mass features from the 1950s onwards when its claims were taken on mainly by the Italian Communist Party (PCI), which was a minor political force compared to the Christian Democratic Party which

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<sup>9</sup>*Affittanze collettive*

<sup>10</sup> For a comparison of today's cooperatives with those of the 1900s see Jerne (2015).

conspired more and more with the conservative classes and the mafia (Mattoni 2013). In this phase mafia was synonymous to agrarian privileges while anti-mafia meant workers' rights.

From the 1960s onwards, the mafia became a more skilful State entrepreneur, infiltrating the tertiary sector and accessing institutional power as well as expanding its cross-Atlantic alliances. As the Italian economy industrialised, the mafia started to have a prominent role in accessing and gaining control of public funds, especially in the construction industry. The mafia developed particularly in relation to, as well as inside, the emergent State bourgeoisie. Due to the weakened labour unions and institutional channels, the anti-mafia movement was in this phase primarily characterised by solitary activists who stood up to corruption and violence through cultural media such as radio programmes and pamphlets. In this phase mafia meant State infiltration and corruption while anti-mafia stood for transparency and social justice.

The 1970s marked an economic boom for the mafia due to the increasing financialisation of the economy, the expansion of the drug market and its international networks. The explosion of their wealth resulted in a fierce war between the two main factions of the Sicilian mafia in the 1980s, which had macabre spill-overs within civil society and resulted in the assassination of key institutional figures that had been particularly active in fighting Cosa Nostra. The 1990s were characterised by an intense period of mass protests, demonstrations and emotional reactions nationally, which echoed the idea that the mafia could no longer be seen as a regional issue but rather that the entire social contract on which Italy was built was at stake.

From this period onwards mafia has taken on an increasingly hybrid meaning, paralleling its expansion on different continents and sectors of the economy. Today it stands for injustice, violence, State, drugs, war, globalisation, financialisation, and even pollution. Analogously, the anti-mafia has expanded its referent object and stands for social justice, the rule of law, peace, environmentalism, education and localism. The actors involved in this struggle are therefore increasingly diverse and difficult to encapsulate. Recent decades have, for instance, seen a turn to cultural means to spread protest, as there have been few examples of street massacres which called for immediate mass reactions. Daily forms of opposition have been particularly educational, in the forms of awareness raising and research carried out mainly by civil society organisations and private citizens. However, the turn of the century has also added material aspects to anti-mafia-activism. The 109/96 law has been key to the establishment of a protest economy.

When I go to the Zen<sup>11</sup> and talk to kids about the mafia as something horrible, and I tell them the story of the heroes who have stood up to it and been murdered, they look at me and think: ‘Great. My father is in jail and my mother is a whore.’ What do they care about Falcone<sup>12</sup>? That’s why we have to show them that the anti-mafia is a concrete alternative; that it works; that it employs people (Libera Activist 2014, personal communication, 10<sup>th</sup> July).

The movement has hence turned to the market as a space for political action. The previous waves of protest have taken on a strategy of advocacy, of awareness raising and of public demonstration of indignation aimed at a higher force (political representatives, labour unions, criminals) who would act upon these claims in order to produce social transformation. Today’s entrepreneurial turn in anti-mafia activism is however directly enacting a difference through the establishment of alternative markets to those of corruption, tacit acceptance and violence.

If one were to trace a parallel in terms of forms of government, one could say that the movement has transformed from being a representative democracy to a direct democracy. It is in this perspectival shift that I believe the performativity of the movement lies. If performance entails the repetition and reiteration of a certain assemblage (discursive or material), and if that repetition brings a different order into force, challenging one which was previously deemed natural (here lies the critique), then this is what is at stake. I mean this quite pragmatically and as mentioned previously, materially.

In this sense, a performative social movement is one that assembles objects, people and discourses in a manner that challenges a dominant idea of power by directly shifting the material distribution of power through its actions. The resulting set of relations between its agents therefore disrupts the way in which contention is conceived and practiced. It is a particular practice (here economic enterprise) that critiques a particular discourse (representative politics).

In many ways, this resonates with some of the more recent discussions within social movement studies around the valence of every-day politics. Yates (2015b), for instance, re-interprets the notion of prefigurative politics<sup>13</sup> as a dynamic analytical tool, allowing for important considerations on the relationship between the goals and practices of social movements. Yet his work is concerned with cognitive representations (being informed by Melucci), whereas performativity is not focused on

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<sup>11</sup> Zen is a particularly difficult neighbourhood in the North of Palermo. The area has experienced high crime rates and mafia infiltrations.

<sup>12</sup> Giovanni Falcone is a judge who was murdered in 1992 because of his effective work in incarcerating Cosa Nostra affiliates.

<sup>13</sup> The term prefigurative politics is most commonly used to denote movements whose practices are a reproduction of their overall world views on a smaller scale. For an in depth account of its origins and current uses see Yates (2015b).

inscriptive values, but rather on the force of composition, and what the encounter between different objects can unlock. The different levels of political goals that are inherent in the idea of prefigurative politics (in tension between what one practices daily and what one wants to achieve on greater temporal/spatial scale) are per se not central to performatives. What is fundamental here is not the scale of the politics, - whether it has movement, institutional, local, or global effects, - but rather its political assemblage: the syntax it takes up. It can in fact be useful for the analysis of certain forms of so-called 'lifestyle movements' (Haenfler et al, 2012) as well as more manifest forms of protest<sup>14</sup>. In this usage, performativity denotes a 'hack'. And this gives space for processual thinking within grassroots politics.

In the case of the anti-mafia, many factors have allowed for this performativity. It is a centennial struggle which has led to moving beyond a penal approach, towards hybrid ways of contrasting the illegal. Discursive and cultural approaches have been important ingredients that have led to a broader public understanding and engagement with the phenomena. Internet platforms have fed into this, accelerating the speed of contagion. The legal intervention has broken the border between State and civil society as responsible agents for change. These are all infrastructural changes that are already solidly in place and have enabled economic activism. This is where Albrow's analysis might end, and where mine continues.

The performativity of the movement is not solely the result of structures (such as the establishment of a law) that produce new realities; rather, it is rather a processual activity of reiterating critique to alter an ongoing situation. Micro-ruptures are thus continuously occurring; although this is outside the scope of this article, some examples are necessary to show the current resignifying practices of the movement. The *Libera Terra* brand is a good instance of how market is being reframed. The anti-mafia is using brands as vectors to transport their politics and to connect individuals with the same desire. It is reiterating their function by allowing for brands to function as political instruments: if you buy an *Addio Pizzo*<sup>15</sup> product you support entrepreneurs who oppose extortion, or in the case of *Libera Terra* you give money to a cooperative that is trying to re-utilise criminal land and employ socially disadvantaged labourers. As Arvidsson noted (2006), brands (and their underlying

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<sup>14</sup> An example of the latter is the use of the #llridewithyou hashtag following the Martin Place siege in Sydney in 2014. Here the islamophobic discourse propagated by the media was shifted directly through the same device (Twitter) into a large solidarity network that offered to accompany or provide transportation to Muslims who were frightened of being seen in public wearing religious clothing. The power of the media industry was directly challenged by the power of online-crowds in setting the tones of the discourse through a particular set of practices.

<sup>15</sup> Addio Pizzo is an association of consumers and entrepreneurs that refuse to pay protection money.



communities) have transformed from being a mere symbolic expression of identity to the concrete entrepreneurial productive force of that same identity. In this assemblage brands are interrupting the economic-political divide.

Another example comes in the form of tourism, one of the growing sectors of the ‘experience economy’ (Pine and Gilmore 1999; Knudsen et al. 2014). As more and more consumers demand authentic and immersive experiences, the anti-mafia has responded by turning this trend into a possibility for doing politics. For instance *Addio Pizzo Travel* connects consumers who want to experience the dark heritage sights of the mafia with local hospitality services that are standing up to extortion. The two paths of desire intersect: on one hand that of the tourist craving for authentic and meaningful experiences, and, on the other, that of the entrepreneur who wants to make his business grow following a certain ethic. In this way, the movement is reframing tourism as a political economy which stands against the mafia.

In recent years, the anti-mafia movement is, in this sense, not simply making claims against, but materially changing, something it contends: an illegal economy. While this turn could be analysed as a form of political consumerism, I find it more useful to highlight the larger picture, to avoid artificially isolating consumption practices from the many other forces that surround the movement. In fact, the anti-mafia is a large panorama of social movement organisations, apps, institutional forces, books, consumers, prisons, supermarkets, tourists, volunteers, religious groups, museums, educational groups, artists, radio-stations, laws, environmentalists, confiscated assets, photographs, cooperatives and civil society groups. The performativity of the movement does not per se lie in the fact that it has turned to the market, but that these actors have assembled in a way that enforces a power shift. In fact, one could argue that the movement, through its direct substitution of both the State and the mafia in guaranteeing a clean market is challenging the dominant discourse of contentious politics itself. By reiterating an alternative assemblage of power relations, one which does not perform a protest act in order to persuade somebody in power to do something, but instead takes the micro-politics into its own hands and contrasts it through an alternative performance, it is challenging the ‘citizen-State’ power relation as much as it is challenging the ‘mafia-economy’ relationship.

## **Conclusions**

Engaging with certain uses of performativity theory (Butler 2010; Roelvink et al. 2015) has shifted my perspective. It has led me to question the epistemic nature of research: is it just a hermeneutic activity, or is there the possibility of influencing what we want to see in the world? Just as discourses

have the potential to influence material performatives (Callon 2007), so material practices have the ability to trigger new thought and elaborate a change in discourse. This is effectively what happened through my own encounter with a material object: it led me to connect performativity with social movements.

Throughout this article, I have sought to highlight the performativity of an assemblage, which shifted my own vision of the political stagnation which surrounded me. I traced some of the issues within social movement literature that are unfit for the description of movements that halt the division between politics and the economy: on one hand, the coding of class as economic versus the coding of identity as social/cultural, and, on the other, the hierarchical separation between Politics (institutional) and politics (grassroots). The first movement has led culturally informed analyses to turn away from material issues, while the second has relegated the 'economy' to the institutional sphere, and thereby granted grassroots actors' agency only *a posteriori*. My suggestion to bridge these positions has been to engage with performativity theory, to shift the focus to the materiality of the practices.

This position arises from two concerns. The first is a result of the empirical unfolding of events, and the necessity to have analytical tools that can, in my view, better describe the numerous political struggles which are occurring *through* the economy. Although there are many historical examples of these types of political struggles, today's infrastructures augment the possibility for the circulation of ideas and capital that can be turned into political enterprises (Arvidsson and Peitersen 2013). Moving beyond the use of 'State' and 'culture' as filters, is necessary in order to render the hybridity of reality justice. My second motivation is normative. Highlighting the material practices that allow for alternative assemblages of power is a choice. It is important to look closely at the *processes* that deconstruct and reassemble novel expressions of power, not only because they need to be described, but because they need to be prioritised. Choosing to discuss some forms of contestation more than others is a response to narratives of crisis, of anxiety, and of 'waiting for the revolution'. Let us not be distracted; revolutions are already happening. One must take all possible paths to arrive at the same destination: a politics of possibility (Roelvink et al. 2015).

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