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Assessing depoliticization in LGBTQ+ activism
An analysis of the local organization "Arc" and of its transformative potential

Image: Irene Patanè, Sardegna Pride 2018, Cagliari (IT).

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Abstract

Post-politics scholars identify a systematic depoliticization of social action in post-Cold War neoliberal democracies. However, by rigidly defining political disagreement as inherently antagonistic and disruptive of the given order, this critique largely disregards the plurality of emancipatory action. Moreover, while these claims remain highly theoretical and largely lack empirical considerations, depoliticization tendencies are assumed to be universal. In this sense, the NGO-ization literature has been able to provide real-life examples of dynamics of co-optation, institutionalization, professionalization, and commodification of activism. However, in-depth discussions of these patterns in LGBTQ+ movements are still scarce. Through a case-based qualitative study, this paper provides the theoretical literature with nuanced observations of local-scale LGBTQ+ activism. By exploring practices and strategies employed by the Sardinian organization "Arc" to safeguard its transformative potential, this paper concludes that depoliticization cannot be considered ubiquitous and that social action can only be assessed within specific cultural and socio-political contexts.

Keywords: depoliticization, LGBTQ+ activism, NGO-ization, radical action, urban social movements.

Introduction

The radical potential inherent to Lefebvre's "right to the city", as initially formulated in "Le Droit à la Ville" (1968), has animated the struggles of various social movements in the urban arena for several decades (Attoh, 2011). The right to the city reimagines the urban space as the foundation of an inclusive, cohesive, and just society against the primacy of neoliberal commodification and the destructive power of capitalism (Dikeç, 2002; Harvey, 2009; Marcuse, 2009). Nonetheless, several scholars claim that over the past 40 years urban social movements have reinterpreted this motto in an array of versions, including trivialized and watered-down ones (Mayer, 2009; Purcell, 2002; Attoh, 2011). In fact, since the 1980s, faced with the social consequences of neoliberal policies, local governments have turned to social movements to help them provide services and innovative solutions. A tendency to reconfiguration "from opposition to cooperation" in social action has led to a fragmentation of claims which ultimately compromises the transformative nature of the right to the city (Mayer, 2009).

This shift has been described as the "NGO-ization" of activism, which entails depoliticization through cooptation, professionalization, commodification, and institutionalization of social action (Bilić, 2015; Nambiar, 2012; Stubbs, 2006). In relation to LGBTQ+ activism, patterns of NGO-ization have been correlated to recent progress in the obtainment of legal rights, which has gradually resulted in the overall depoliticization of the movement (Podmore, 2015). However, in contrast with the NGO-ization thesis, some scholars have claimed that, in a climate of legitimation crisis of neoliberal institutions, fluid, overarching, grassroots urban initiatives have started to emerge globally (Bilić, 2015; Mayer, 2009; Nambiar, 2012). These two tendencies are often identified as dichotomous: the top-down conservative strategy of placing responsibilities on the civil society in opposition to the bottom-up progressive strategy of counteraction (Stubbs, 2006). Nonetheless, rather than focusing on benchmarking through standardized models of community development, a comprehensive analysis of emerging forms of activism would require the scrutiny of context-related factors that hinder or facilitate mobilization (Bilić, 2015; Stubbs, 2006).

In line with these considerations, this thesis is based on a case-study analysis of local LGBTQ+ activism in Italy. This context arguably offers an ideal scenario for the exploration of patterns of NGO-ization. In fact, Prearo (2015) discusses the complexity of LGBTQ+ mobilization in Italy through the scrutiny of its heterogeneous and often contradictory strategies. While the movement converges around claims for equality and legal rights, it is underpinned by diversified interactions, relations, discourses, and practices. This is largely due to the atavistic resistance of the national ruling class to the movement's demands, which has led activists to form alliances with local representatives of civil society and create partnerships with local institutions (Prearo, 2015). In fact, Italy consistently ranks among the worst countries in Europe for LGBTQ+ rights (Grazi, 2022). Moreover, according to a national study on urban inclusivity, cities from the South and the Islands present the lowest levels of dedicated services and infrastructures, cultural and socialization initiatives, urban security, and employment for the LGBTQ+ community (Corbisiero & Monaco, 2017).

Despite a national-scale network of 71 affiliated associations and groups, Arcigay, the largest LGBTQ+ organization in Italy, is currently not present on the island of Sardinia (Arcigay, 2021a). However, in 2002, a volunteer-based organization by the name "Arc" was created in Cagliari, the island's capital city. It is interesting to notice that the organization's main goals are parallel to those of its national counterpart, however, they maintain independence from the network (Arc, 2021). While no analogous study has been carried out on this case, the specificity of the national socio-political context as well as the circumstances

of the creation of Arc represent a particularly relevant subject for the analysis of patterns of NGO-ization and depoliticization in urban activism. This thesis thus aims to address the question:

How does the LGBTQ+ organization "Arc" try to claim and implement "the right to the city" in Cagliari? Through the following sub-questions: *Which discursive and spatial strategies does Arc employ in their struggle for LGBTQ+ rights? How has NGO-ization affected the political strategy and actions of Arc? How has Arc negotiated the 'right to the city' in interaction with local authorities?*

Through the analysis of in-depth interviews with Arc's activists and relevant policy documents, this thesis attempts to shed light on recent developments in LGBTQ+ activism and offer nuanced empirical observations of the patterns identified by the literature. Ultimately, this study aims to overcome the dichotomous theoretical approach to radical action by looking at the opportunity structure and the implications for urban social movements claiming the right to the city within specific contexts. Lastly, by discussing the overall impact of their strategy and highlighting macro and micro-level challenges to transformation, this study supports Arc in its struggle against the oppression of the local LGBTQ+ community and contributes to the exchange of successful experiences of social emancipation.

Theoretical Framework

In order to analyze recent developments in practices and strategies of social action, it is crucial to explore the existing theoretical and empirical literature on the depoliticization of activism. The first section critically discusses the theoretical implications of post-politics critiques for social transformation. Having observed a general lack of context-based, empirical considerations within this body of literature, the second section provides various examples of depoliticization (and countertendencies) in social movements from the literature on NGO-ization. Lastly, the third section focuses on the LGBTQ+ movement in the literature and the risks connected to its depoliticization.

Radical action in post-democracies

From the work of Lefebvre onwards, there is a tendency towards vagueness in the literature on the right to the city in relation to the definition of rights (Attoh, 2011). Despite the radical potential inherent to the initial conceptualization (Mayer, 2009; Purcell, 2002), the theoretical underpinnings of social and urban justice required to define the political edge of the

right to the city remain vague and fragmented (Attoh, 2011). For example, Harvey (2003) interprets the right to the city as the right to the democratic and egalitarian management of the urban space against the primacy of the capitalist interests of the wealthy. However, the political implications of this conceptualization may vary depending on the underlying definition of rights. Namely, on whether the right to the city is interpreted in terms of civil liberty, which implies law-breaking practices against the given order, or as the socio-economic right to partake in the capitalist surplus (Attoh, 2011). Ultimately, the analysis of the implementation of the right to the city requires clarification on conceptualizations of social justice and transformative action.

Several scholars concerned with radical equality have analyzed contemporary democratic regimes through the lens of post-political critique. The latter identifies patterns of depoliticization of the public sphere as well as a systematic erosion of democracy in post-Cold War society (Dikeç, 2017; Mouffe, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2011). The inherently antagonistic, properly political dimension has been replaced by consensual social management and reduced to governing processes (Baeten in Swyngedouw, 2011). Political decisions are presented as natural and objective thus precluding any questioning of the predominant liberal-democratic order (Žižek, 1999). In fact, in the work of Rancière (2004), this entails systematic repression of dissensus in which forms of domination and oppression appear as organic components of the post-political society.

Regarding the conceptualization of radical social action, Dikeç (2002) explains that "politics proper implies a disruption of the police order", however, the latter eludes these interferences by depoliticizing phenomena of dissensus (Dikeç, 2017). Swyngedouw (2011) adds that political disagreement is essentially limited to either its inclusion in the post-democratic order through "arrangements of impotent participation", or reduced to disavowing, uncontrolled, and violent ultra-politics of dissensus, whenever it fundamentally undermines the existing economic, social, and political configuration. However, several authors reject this dichotomous interpretation, as it essentially leads to a discriminating distinction between heroic/non-heroic actions. In fact, many argue for a more diversified approach that can confer political dignity to the plurality of emancipatory mobilization (Beveridge & Koch, 2016; Dikeç, 2017; Mouffe, 2005; Swerts & Nicholls, 2021).

In line with the post-political critique, Mouffe (2005) warns against the ontological contradiction of democracy "beyond antagonism". However, the author elaborates on the idea of "conflictual consensus", which constitutes an attempt to overcome the political dangers of idealized rational consensus and imagine an "agonistic public sphere of contestation" that

ultimately provides political disagreement with legitimate forms of expression (Mouffe, 2013). This contribution allows us to re-conceptualize the plurality of social action within a middle ground between disruptive antagonism and depoliticized governance. The legitimation of Mouffe's "conflictual consensus" (2005) within the given order is underpinned by an ethico-political agreement, which should however remain continuously open to political contestation.

Overall, it can be concluded that while post-political critiques focus on universal theoretical accounts of depoliticization, they generally fail to consider real-life diversifications of transformative politics. In fact, the literature assumes that the crisis of democracy has occurred univocally and ubiquitously. However, despite instances of unsuccessful mobilization as a result of depoliticization, other authors have discussed various empirical examples of social transformation through grassroots initiatives and everyday non-heroic practices of dissensus from within the liberal democratic order (in Swerts & Nicholls, 2021). Thus, the next section analyzes context-based experiences of politicization and depoliticization in order to provide empirical examples of the patterns highlighted by post-politics scholars and of their diversification.

Politicization and depoliticization of activism

The literature on NGO-ization arguably offers a more nuanced contextualization of the development of social action. Overall, scholars describe this phenomenon as the replacement of horizontal, community-based emancipatory efforts with small-scale, hierarchical, and professionalized organizations whose action is characterized by depoliticized discourses and practices (Buchely, 2016; Lang, 2013; Jakobsson, 2012; Nambiar, 2012; Stubbs; 2006). As introduced in the previous chapter, the literature claims that this process derives from the necessity of neoliberal governments to find innovative ways to mitigate socio-economic inequalities (for the most part aggravated by the liberalization and privatization of welfare benefit provisions) through the institutionalization of grassroots mobilization. Thus, the latter began to specialize in the para-governmental delivery of services in exchange for organizational stability and political legitimation (Gideon, 1998; Mayer, 2009; Stubbs, 2006).

In analyzing the history of feminist movements in newly reunified Germany, Lang (2013; 2000) notices that this shift caused ambivalent consequences which have overall resulted in depriving women of their voice. Under the non-governmental organizational form, the traditional goals regarding the establishment of a new democratic counterculture of emancipation and equality have been replaced with issue-specific interventions as well as

pragmatic strategies focused on female employment and based on the decisions of a few "femocrats". Another study on the women's movement in Lebanon observes similar developments and adds to the literature by analyzing the effects of professionalization of social action. In fact, Mitri (2015) argues that the latter led to a "salarization process", supported by donor agencies' requirements, that has in turn created a new category of workers halfway between activists and employees. This has contributed to the shift from an action-oriented to a managerial organizational form. Additionally, the author notices how in Middle Eastern countries, due to the overall hostility of conservative and Islamist parties to female emancipation, specialized women's organizations tend to collaborate closely with the state. However, negotiating their position within governmental institutions has resulted in the dilution of the radical character of their feminist agenda (Mitri, 2015).

The literature on migrants' rights advocacy offers other relevant examples of NGO-ization, especially in regard to instrumentalization, commodification, and cooptation. In a study on Colombian NGOs, Bucheley (2016) discusses how the competing interests of third and private sector philanthropic elites have replaced grassroots demands in strategic agendas. In fact, the withdrawal of the state from the provision of assistive resources and the subsequent privatization of the latter has resulted in the reproduction of patterns of inequality of access, which in turn entails the exclusion of the most economically marginalized. The author also emphasizes how the reliance on international donors from migrant receptor countries such as Spain has allowed the instrumentalization of agendas in order to strengthen migration programs in migrant-producing regions and reduce responsibility for arriving countries.

Lambert and Swerts (2019) similarly discuss patterns of cooptation and professionalization of radical initiatives in relation to the representation deficit of grassroots interests. The authors describe how local citizens' mobilization for the protection of undocumented migrants in Belgium has been coopted by immigrant rights professionals due to their capacity for compromising and negotiating with local institutions. However, this resulted in the adoption of a watered-down version of the motion initially campaigned for by the urban movement, which limited the transformative and radical potential of their demands for equality and regularization.

Although the literature extensively discusses patterns of depoliticization of social action through mechanisms of NGO-ization, the latter cannot be generalized. In fact, countertendencies have been identified in relation to recent initiatives based on civic engagement, collective mobilization, and active citizenship in urban protests. (Bilić & Stubbs, 2015; Fagan & Sircar, 2017; Meyer, 2009; Stubbs, 2006). In particular, Meyer (2009) has

discussed the role of global protests against the economic crisis, which connected different claims, such as climate and housing activism, under the overarching dissensus towards the destructiveness of neoliberal governance. These movements have been able to create "counter-spaces", in Lefevre's words (1991), where capitalist normativity is challenged through pragmatic and needs-oriented action. Additionally, building on Scott's (in Fagan & Sircar, 2017) definition of "infra-politics", Fagan and Sircar (2017) look at non-institutionalized grassroots initiatives in Southeast Europe, such as the emergence of independent, not-for-profit, social engagement-oriented bookshops in Serbia, and discuss the long-term relevance for social transformation of these small-scale cultural challenges to the status quo.

Ultimately, these instances of non-NGO grassroots activism offer an opportunity for this study to reflect on the multiplicity of political agency occurring in the urban sphere and to reconcile different forms of social action with the context from which they emerge. Keeping in mind Mouffe's (2005) formulation of the "ethico-political agreement", the transformative potential of these initiatives can help us re-conceptualize radical action to include different forms of mobilization in the name of democratic values of liberty and equality. Moreover, patterns of depoliticization resulting from a tendency to NGO-ization within the neoliberal order reiterate the importance of contextualizing social action within specific structural constraints in order to understand how radical activists negotiate their legitimation for the achievement of social change in liberal democracies.

LGBTQ+ activism and its radical potential

The depoliticization of the LGBTQ+ movement may have particularly detrimental consequences for the communities they represent. To understand the radical potential of LGBTQ+ politics, it is crucial to look at the political implications of queer theory, which underpins the movement's strategy and demands. Queer theory attempts to combat the lack of scholarly focus on gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation on relevant issues to the LGBTQ+ community, which results in concealing identities and potentially reinforcing the hegemonic culture (Mertens, 2009). Butler (1990) defines the "heterosexual matrix" as the linear relationship between sex, gender, and (hetero)sexuality that underpins heteronormative discourses and practices. As Srivastava observes (2014), the latter informs the legal frameworks through which the state operates, thus nonconforming sexuality is understood not only as non-natural but also non-legal. The theoretical aspiration of queer theory implies an epistemological commitment to deconstruction in order to challenge the imprecise nature of

gender binarism embedded in sociological representations of the subject. In line with these theoretical considerations, the term "LGBTQ+", as employed in this paper, is representative of the intention to mitigate taxonomical limitations with an umbrella term that includes all non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities (Montz, 2021).

Despite radical theoretical underpinnings, extant studies highlight that as activists obtained basic legal rights in a large part of the Western world, including civil unions and same-sex marriage, the movement largely underwent depoliticization and institutionalization within the neoliberal order (Bilić & Stubbs, 2015; Bernstein, 2015; Podmore, 2015). Nonetheless, Bernstein (2015) claims that the "official marriage equality discourse often circumvents rather than embraces the challenge to heteronormativity". Hence, radical queer activists in the US have pushed for deprioritizing marriage and recuperating the movement's transformative potential by redirecting their efforts towards intersectional inequalities for transgender and low-income queer people in fields such as housing, employment, and healthcare (Cauterucci, 2019). In Italy, retrieving the critical antagonism of queer theory within the LGBTQ+ struggle appears more crucial than ever in light of current cultural and political developments. In fact, the apparent success of the movement's "civil rights' normalization" strategy following the enactment of same-sex unions in 2016 was quickly disproved by the recent rise in popularity of right-wing anti-queer and homophobic discourses combined with anti-abortionist and anti-immigration populist claims (Pustianaz, 2019). Overall, the 2016 bill is still far from guaranteeing marriage equality, especially since the inclusion of the stepchild adoption was entirely ruled out due to pressures from right-wing MPs (Guizzardi, 2017).

Nonetheless, despite the theoretical and practical need for a focused discussion on patterns of depoliticization for the advancement of the movement's claims in the current political climate, such mechanisms have not yet been studied within the Italian context. In fact, the LGBTQ+ movement has been traditionally analyzed through the lens of new social movements theory due to its focus on the fight for the legal, political, social, and cultural condition of the LGBTQ+ people (Srivastava, 2014). New social movement theories address the shortcomings of the classical Marxist analysis of collective action based on proletarian revolution to explain the new features of social movements that emerged in the late 1960s. In fact, post-industrial mobilization is based on new logics, namely culture, ideology, as well as new sources of identity such as gender, sexuality, and ethnicity (Buechler, 1995).

The interface between LGBTQ+ activists and the community they act for raises some fundamental questions on the processes and mechanisms involved in the institutional-level promotion of equality, representation of the community's claims, and overall emancipation

strategy. However, while there is extensive literature assessing the role of national and international NGOs, social movements, and advocacy in societal change (DeMars, 2005; Desposato & Wang, 2020; Franklin, 2018; Meyer et al., 2005; Murdie & Davies, 2012), specific studies on the impact of LGBTQ+ activism are scarcer. Furthermore, while a significant part of the extant literature tends to focus on the systemic impact of the LGBTQ+ movement, namely on legislation and policymaking, in different geographical contexts (King, 2013; Asal et al., 2021; Srivastava, 2014; Reynolds, 2013; Aydin & Colgan, 2020), only a few studies carefully consider its transformative potential in relation to macro-level patterns of NGO-ization and depoliticization of social action (Stubbs, 207; Bilić & Stubbs, 2015; Wang, 2021; Roy, 2011). Thus, this study attempts to bring a more focused perspective on the recent developments in political activism discussed by the literature with an empirical analysis of the academically unexplored LGBTQ+ activist scene of Sardinia.

Research Design and Methods

This chapter introduces the methods of this study and discusses their advantages and disadvantages. In the first section, the case study approach is identified as the most relevant research design for the phenomenon under investigation. The second section describes data collection methods, namely interviews and critical discourse analysis, and assesses the implications for the quality of the research findings. Finally, the last section explores methodological limitations as well as ethical concerns for the study.

Case study design

In order to narrow down the complexity of depoliticization and NGO-ization patterns in LGBTQ+ activism, an in-depth contextual analysis has been identified as the most appropriate design for this study. The unexplored local specificity of the organization Arc, as described in previous sections, provides the opportunity to conduct an illustrative investigation of the interplay of activists with local institutions, civil society, and the community they seek to empower. In fact, by employing a case study approach the researcher aims to reveal multi-faceted understandings while creating space for the voices of participants (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Thus, interviewees' contributions have been accompanied by a brief "case history" to provide a clearer understanding of their individual backgrounds and experiences and contextualize the collected data (writing@csu, 2021). Overall, this research design allows contributing to the theoretical debates on depoliticization and NGO-ization with nuanced real-

life considerations (Ridder, 2017). Furthermore, it represents an opportunity to compensate for the scarcity of context-based study of these patterns in LGBTQ+ activism. Lastly, an in-depth focus on the case of Arc adds transformative value to the study, as the analysis contributes to the sustainable development of the organization (Toomey, 1997).

One-on-one and group interviews

This study largely relies on in-depth qualitative interviews. Participants have been selected through purposive sampling (Bryman, 2016). The six board members of Arc have been identified as critical cases since their knowledge of the phenomena under investigation is assumed to be highly relevant (Putton in Flick, 2007). Additionally, five regular members who actively contribute to the organization of activities and events have been included in the study. The selection of the latter was based on snowball sampling by asking participants for relevant contacts (Bryman, 2016). Interviews have been conducted in April 2022, in the form of face-to-face meetings. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to one hour and a half and began with an opportunity for the interviewee to clarify any doubts about the aims of the study (Bryman, 2016). The interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions to allow a certain degree of adaptability to different participants (see Appendix A). While interviewees were encouraged to discuss personal accounts, the questionnaire was presented as a guideline to ensure data quality (King & Horrocks, 2010).

A focus group of a duration of two and a half hours was carried out with the selected regular members. This method allows participants to autonomously prioritize certain aspects while the researcher relinquishes control over the discussion. Additionally, contributions are likely to be more nuanced than in one-to-one interviews as individuals have the opportunity to probe and challenge each other's argumentations (Bryman, 2016). Overall, an inductive approach was maintained throughout the data collection process. Thus, specific boundaries of the research have been finalized as they emerged during fieldwork according to their theoretical relevance (Kramer & Adams, 2017). Finally, all collected data has been transcribed and qualitatively coded through the software Atlas.it (King & Horrocks, 2010).

Critical discourse analysis

To increase the validity and reliability of the study, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was carried out on two relevant policy documents (Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012). The

constitution of Arc and the official agreement with the municipality for the concession of Arc's headquarters have been analyzed to reveal the social and political meanings intended by the authors (Van Dijk, 1997). In fact, discursive practices, in the form of text production, can be considered as dialectically interacting with context, thus constituted and constitutive of socio-political realities. Most importantly, discursive practices can perpetuate, restore, and transform the social status quo (Barker & Galasinski, 2001). Hence, CDA was employed to pin down understandings of radical social action, emancipation, and transformation as well as ideological meanings that underpin the interactions between Arc's activists, institutions, and civil society. Finally, while available media articles have been examined for fact-checking, their analysis was not included in the discussion of the findings based on theoretical relevance.

Ethical considerations and limitations

Confirmation of participation was preliminarily sought from the board members of Arc in December 2021 through personal acquaintances who acted as gatekeepers (Bryman, 2016). An informed consent form, inclusive of an explanation of the study objectives and relevance, was handed out to participants prior to the beginning of the research activities (see Ethics and Privacy Checklist). Anonymity and data confidentiality was guaranteed by storing recordings, transcripts, and other material in password-protected personal devices (Flick, 2007). Generally speaking, interviewees may be reluctant to share personal stories or opinions on the subject under investigation, namely their involvement in LGBTQ+ activism, if connected to experiences of discrimination, harassment, or other traumatic life events (Bryman, 2016). However, transparency on the study aims, previously established rapport and progressive closeness with participants significantly contributed to increased openness during data collection.

Finally, the researcher's inherently privileged position vis-à-vis the researched may affect the study's trustworthiness. Having participated in several of Arc's initiatives as an ally, the author's views may have emerged in interactions with participants thus unintentionally influencing their responses. Furthermore, the researcher's first-hand experience with the organization further increased the risk of bias in the analysis. However, this methodology has been designed considering such power imbalance as well as potentially opposing positions to those of the author (Råheim, 2016). Thus, while being part of the reality under observation rather than a neutral actor, I claim the plausibility of this study by relying on reflexivity and accounting for my values and beliefs throughout the research (Berger, 2015).

Furthermore, the study design presents inherent limitations around generalizability to the wider population. However, Maxwell (in Flick, 2007) claims that, in qualitative research, findings can be considered valid merely in relation to the settings under investigation. This is in line with the aim of this thesis, namely, to add nuance to the theoretical literature through a case-based empirical analysis. In conclusion, despite limitations, the chosen methods represent a crucial component of the study's innovative character.

Results and Analysis

The following chapter analyzes the findings of the study. Following the three sub-questions presented in the introduction, the first section explores the origins of Arc and its political underpinnings, the development of its activities throughout the years in response to the needs of the local community, as well as Arc's achievements in terms of legitimacy, visibility, and emancipation of the local LGBTQ+ community. Having examined the literature on NGO-ization in the previous chapter, the second section explores elements of depoliticization and assesses their influence on the transformative impact of the organization with particular reference to Arc's relationships with (local) institutions. Finally, keeping in mind the findings of the first and second sections, the last one discusses in what ways the organization has managed to preserve its radical potential despite structural and contextual challenges.

The origins of Arc and its activities in the city of Cagliari

According to Article 2 of its constitution (Arc, 2021), Arc was founded in 2002 as a "*volunteer-based permanent center for community life*" animated by "*democratic, pacifist, ecologist, antiracist, antitotalitarian, antifascist, libertarian and anti-neoliberalist*" values. The goals of the organization, which are largely the same since its creation (Interview 3), include the promotion of LGBTQ+ culture, the fight against all forms of discrimination, and advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights in political and juridical spaces. Additionally, Arc aims to organize activities and create opportunities for socialization, dialogue, and information, and to contribute to the defense and practice of civil liberties and democracy as well as to the development of solidarity networks (Arc, 2021).

These ideological claims reflect the political values of its founders and early members, who at the time were actively involved in left-wing youth-led movements and political parties (Interview 1; Interview 2; Interview 6). As the current president and co-founder of Arc explains:

My vision is that of Porto Alegre[1], of all intersectional social movements in which the LGBT battle was fitting in again after the weakening of the 80s and 90s. There, until the fall of the Twin Towers which stopped everything, it really was tried to re-create a unified global movement that would change things and to me, being an LGBT activist was also being an activist who wanted to preserve the environment, the biodiversity, for immigration...we don't separate. (Interview 3)

Thus, it can be observed that the foundation of Arc was grounded in the intention to recuperate the transformative potential of the late '60s and early '70s social movements after the systematic crisis of antagonistic political action identified by depoliticization scholars (Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 2004; Žižek, 1999). While the first World Pride was being held in Rome and the movement was gaining unprecedented visibility at a national level, the creation of Arc also presented the opportunity to fill a void in the LGBTQ+ activist scene of Cagliari, as other previous attempts had failed for internal reasons (Interview 3).

The development of the wide range of activities that currently allow Arc to pursue its social and political goals has been gradual. In fact, the first few years of the organization were largely characterized by informal and self-referential initiatives: participation was based on word-of-mouth, and activities revolved around the promotion of LGBTQ+ culture, especially through film screenings and book presentations, as well as self-reflection and self-education meetings (Interview 2; Interview 1). Despite the militant experience of its founders, it was only in May 2009, having joined forces with a group of Sardinian feminists in the occasion of the International Day Against Homophobia, that Arc entered its more properly political phase of activism: "*It was the first street demonstration in which Arc visibly participated [...]. From niche initiatives, book presentations, film presentations in the periphery we reached the streets of the city center with a clear political platform and a strong political claim*" (Interview 1). Overall, this shift was facilitated by both internal and external factors, namely a large enough membership base to mobilize but also growing societal awareness of LGBTQ+ issues in Cagliari, which at that point was lagging behind compared to the nation-scale achievements of the movement (Interview 1).

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[1] The city in Brazil where the first edition of the World Social Forum was held. These events united several representatives of the civil society under the intersectional fight against hegemonic globalization and neoliberalism (Hammond, 2003).

In 2012 Arc overtly consolidated its role in the activist scene of Cagliari with the creation of the Cagliari Pride, the first pride march ever held in Sardinia. Throughout the years, the organizing committee has grown to include several LGBTQ+ organizations from other parts of the island under the name "Coordinamento Sardegna Pride", which officially extended the reach of the event from the capital city to the entire region (Interview 1). Nowadays, the Sardegna Pride is not only one of the most participated Prides per population size in Italy (the last pre-pandemic edition counted 40,000 participants), but also the largest street demonstration in Sardinia in terms of both amount and diversity of participants as well as socio-political claims. Indeed, the Sardegna Pride has become an opportunity to join forces in a street demonstration for a series of organizations from large-scale trade unions to the local Amnesty International group (Interview 5). Interviewees described the growth of the event in scope and outreach as a breakthrough in the obtainment of legitimacy and visibility in the eye of the public and local institutions (Interview 1; Interview 3). In the president's words, *"once it started to bring 15, 20, 25 thousand people to the streets, it became difficult to ignore us and the movement even for administrations that carry out very different policies than ours"* (Interview 3).

While all editions of Sardegna Pride have been accompanied by a manifesto and clear demands to authorities, thus reinforcing its political character, a board member distinguishes between a "*quantitative*" and a "*qualitative*" function of Arc's activities and events (Interview 4). In that sense, the quantitative impact of the Pride parade, namely increasing membership base, support from the public, and political visibility, has allowed Arc to qualitatively develop and diversify its activity with a range of events and initiatives aimed at the promotion of LGBTQ+ rights, culture, and wellbeing in different environments. In fact, until 2016 Arc had held its plenaries and most of its activities in the premises of host political parties (Interview 1). The allocation of a dedicated space by the municipality of Cagliari has been identified by several board members as a milestone in the organization's history, as it facilitated the development of in-house activities as well as the organization of events around the city (Interview 1; Interview 2; Interview 3; Interview 6).

Nowadays, the organization pursues its goals through cultural initiatives namely book presentations, multimedia library services, film festivals, and screenings but also through awareness campaigns in schools and other public spaces, counseling services for LGBTQ+ individuals and their families, as well as short-term projects for the local community such as the Italian language course for migrants held from 2018 to 2019 (Interview 2). Arc has also designed annually recurring public events such as the "Non solo lesbiche…" festival and the

"Queeresima" project, that involve different representatives of the civil society namely activists, intellectuals, and political representatives (Interview 4). The latter have been designed to create opportunities for dialogue and exchange within and beyond the LGBTQ+ community. Since 2012, Queeresima, described as a "*multifaceted political experience*" (Interview 6), unites representatives of different organizations to discuss new challenges, claims, and achievements within the movement with the aim of increasing their transformative potential and representativeness (Interview 4). Overall, the nature of Arc's activities highlights the intention to actively respond not only to the needs of the ever-evolving local LGBTQ+ community but also to join forces in a larger-scale collective struggle for equality, as expressed in the values of its constitutions (Arc, 2021). In fact, alongside these activities, the organization continues its militant action through participation in street demonstrations in support of the LGBTQ+ community as well as other shared battles such as the protests for workers' rights on May Day or the Liberation Day parades in support of antifascism and resistance movements (Interview 3), which further highlights its intersectional political character.

Overall, whereas the headquarters of Arc has become a permanent physical safe space for the LGBTQ+ community of Cagliari, for the first time in the local history of the LGBTQ+ movement, Arc has been able to consistently bring the community's claims to public venues and publicize them around the city, thus contributing to the creation of new physical and non-physical LGBTQ+ friendly spaces in Cagliari. One of the volunteers observes:

> *It was revolutionary to me that a queer festival was being advertised around town with posters saying "lesbians". It sounds like a simple thing, but it seemed subversive to me. The fact that, for the first time, issues that had been largely covert were being advertised [...]. The value of the events we do also lies in their mere existence and the fact that they are brought into the light of day.* (Focus group 1)

Considering the level of awareness and acceptance of the local population, this represents a remarkable achievement in the pursuit of Arc's goals for the LGBTQ+ community of Cagliari (Arc, 2021). As one of the board members puts it:

> *In Valencia there are like two gay bars left. [...] Why? Because they progressed so far that if you go with your same-sex partner to a bar nobody cares. In Italy, we are still at a phase where you get ads like [...] 'I don't rent to homosexual couples' [...]. Thus, we*

still need those spaces […] where you know you're 99% not going to be discriminated.
(Interview 5)

Elements of depoliticization and challenges to transformative action

Having outlined the origins and development of Arc throughout the years, this section will refer to the literature on NGO-ization with the aim of assessing case-based elements of depoliticization. Overall, a certain degree of professionalization and institutionalization can be identified in relation to the growth of the organization in membership base, scope, and visibility. The formal structure of "Organizzazione di Volontariato" (OdV), namely "volunteer-based organization", has not changed since its creation (Arc, 2021). Nonetheless, while the shift to a more properly political phase considerably increased the visibility and scope of Arc's activities, it has also implied regular interactions with local authorities as well as new responsibilities for an organization of this kind. As explained by a board member:

> *There's been an evolution, due to Arc's growth, that nowadays allows us to say that Arc is one of the most important LGBT organizations […] that are considered, recognized, at a national level. […] We now have a 300m² office, we have relationships with any authority from the prefect to the minister, to organizations around the world. Arc has grown a lot in terms of activities, but also in credibility and in the fact that we are taken into consideration.* (Interview 5)

Overall, interviewees agree that maintaining Arc's political legitimacy and credibility by cultivating positive interactions with relevant institutions represents a key condition to the obtainment of their social and political goals. A board member claims: *"We invest a lot on networks, and we believe that it's important to have good ties with institutions too. It's about respecting each other, […] thus we haven't had major obstacles in the exercise of our initiatives"* (Interview 1). And another explains how it would not be productive to simply antagonize the authorities: *"Unfortunately, you must deal with them. That is, you can raise awareness for the community all you want, however, there must be someone who brings your requests in writing to the parliament and that demands them for you"* (Interview 2). Overall, although Arc is a "non-partisan" organization (Arc, 2021), the context in which it operates has required them to establish a certain level of cooperation, especially with friendly political representatives:

It's not like in Sweden, where the first law against homophobia was passed by the left-wing and after six months the right-wing approved even tougher penalties. […] Here we have to choose between those who smile at us in the light today but would beat us up in the dark tomorrow and those who are friends and take us into consideration. (Interview 5)

Nonetheless, the compromise required to cultivate good relations with authorities while pursuing the LGBTQ+ cause in a political climate that, depending on the party in office, is largely hostile to the movements' demands (Interview 3; Interview 6), has inevitably shaped the character of Arc's action plan. This has particularly emerged in relation to the necessity for activists to comply with norms and lawful behaviors when acting on behalf of the organization, especially during street demonstrations:

Having to ask for permits for the Pride etcetera… you do feel like saying 'I just want to do this, take the streets and demonstrate'. As much as our most revolutionary character would like, we cannot afford that. We are an organization, and we have to comply with the rules because we exist on a political level […] and we already got fined several times. (Focus Group)

Additionally, following the latest national reform of the third sector, legal responsibility for OdVs has been extended from the president to the whole board, as the latter would now be criminally liable in case of unlawful acts. This has resulted, according to an interviewee, in an even higher degree of compliance to safeguard the organization and its members (Interview 5).

Moreover, while the obtainment of office space has significantly expanded Arc's organizational scope, it has also implied a series of practical and legal responsibilities that inevitably affected the amount of available time and resources to pursue the more properly political goals of the organization: "*As we changed location, we had to adjust to the duties, the obligations that this location imposes on us, from curating our media library to keeping the premises clean and tidy and furnishing the place […] many years have been devoted to this*" (Interview 4). At this point, it is important to mention that the agreement with the municipality for the assignment of these premises is conditional on Arc's free-of-charge provision of media library services to the local population (Comune di Cagliari, 2016). This further explains the necessity for the organization to redirect resources in exchange for their working space, as

described in the quotation above, which arguably represents an element of institutionalization and subsequent depoliticization of their activity. As the interviewee continues: "*I have seen a decline of street-level activism to a certain extent, because our structure, both physical but then also as a community, has changed*" (Interview 4).

Overall, organizational growth has led to a "*higher degree of technicality*" in the management of Arc's activities (Interview 1; Interview 2). While the organization continues to rely on volunteer non-paid work, several task groups have been established since 2007 to streamline the workload across members and train individuals to deal with the organization of specific events and activities. However, while discussing how this may have influenced the strategy of the organization compared to the first grassroots steps of Arc in the activist scene, one of the interviewees explains: *"While before there was a certain naiveté in doing anything that came to mind but with a great emotional charge, today, to a certain extent, the emotional charge decreases in an inversely proportionate way as the rate of technicality increases"* (Interview 1). Overall, this statement aligns with scholarly claims that highlight a gradual shift in goals from the creation of grassroots counterculture to issue-specific interventions (Lang, 2000).

Interestingly, the introduction of task groups has been described as a necessary development for the provision of certain services to the community such as their counseling activities, as volunteers require a higher degree of training to fulfill their role (Interview 2). Thus, these findings largely agree with the literature that identifies the withdrawal of the neoliberal state in the provision of services as the reason for the shift from antagonism to cooperation through mechanisms of institutionalization and professionalization of activism (Mayer, 2009; Stubbs, 2006). In fact, when discussing currently available state-provided services, one of the interviewees highlights the necessity to "*fill a gap*" in support of the LGBTQ+ community:

> *We can't act like these people are prepared because they aren't, thus we must somehow interact with them [...]. Because if you work in social services in a municipality and you don't know what transgender means, [...] how can you receive these people? And if we don't try to get a little bit into this, rest assured that they will not train themselves.* (Interview 2)

This has recently culminated in the decision to participate in a call for tenders by the Ufficio Nazionale Antidiscriminazioni Razziali (UNAR) [2] which subsequently allocated €100,000 to the organization for the creation of an LGBTQ+ counseling desk. The latter will be carried out by state-salaried professionals under the supervision of the activists and will run parallelly to Arc's volunteer-based counseling (Interview 2).

Finally, the continuous growth of the organization in membership base has recently required a certain level of moderation from the board, which until lately had represented a mere formality for the existence of Arc as an organization:

> *Until two years ago [...] there were a few names written on a constitution only because, according to the law, every organization must have a board, a president, a secretary. But as the people increased... more identities, more sensitivities, clashes began to arise. So lately we had to get together as a board to figure out how to walk on these hot coals [...]. We've found ourselves somehow taking back a modicum of power concerning attitudes, tones, and behaviors.* (Interview 2)

Until now, as the next section will further discuss, Arc has been able to maintain a high level of horizontality in decision-making compared to similar LGBTQ+ organizations from other parts of Italy (Interview 4). However, while the board will likely be required to function in a gradually more hierarchical manner to guarantee the survival of the organization and avoid fragmentation, this could not only lead to a further degree of institutionalization but also increase the risk of representational deficit of all *"identities and sensitivities"* under a more managerial type of structure.

Arc's resistance to NGO-ization and redefinition of radical action

Having assessed elements of NGO-ization and depoliticization, this last section discusses to what extent the organization has been able to resist structural tendencies and context-based constraints in order to safeguard its transformative potential. Firstly, it is crucial to highlight in what way the legacy of the socio-political context in which the organization was created, as described in the first section, influences its current structure, strategy, and goals.

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[2] UNAR is a national governmental office founded in 2003 to guarantee the right to equal treatment of all people, regardless of their ethnicity, race, age, religious belief, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disabilities (UNAR, 2022).

The grassroots militant experience of Arc's co-founders and the values that animated their political mobilization particularly emerge in relation to the organization's decision-making process: *"it's an environment where we really try to approach everything in a very horizontal way [...], where everyone can bring their point of view"* (Interview 4). In fact, several board and regular members describe the organization as their *"second home"*, as "*a place where you can be yourself"* and "*talk about what matters to you*" (Interview 2; Interview 4; Focus Group). The grassroots character of their structure has allowed Arc to largely reach a democratic consensus on each political stance it has taken throughout the years. As explained by a board member:

> *There is no such thing as the president or the board making decisions for the whole organization. Everything is debated, addressed, and we try to figure out what sensitivities may be offended, that is, we always try to reach a consensus, [...] because everyone needs to feel backed up by whatever comes out of the association.* (Interview 2)

While in some recent cases the plenaries have required a certain level of moderation and certain *"practical, logistical and administrative decisions"* (Interview 5) have been taken by the board, ideological and political issues have always been collectively *"dissected"* (Interview 4).

Regarding the foundational values of Arc, another board member adds: *"Part of the legacy that I think derives from that initial idea, from people who were part of political movements with a fairly left-wing orientation, is that there has always been an effort to keep a certain distance from institutions"* (Interview 6). In this sense, while maintaining good ties with the latter has been identified as a strategic necessity for the organization, several participants (Interview 1; Interview 3; Interview 4) highlight that they would not hesitate to take a more antagonistic stance if the authorities were to obstruct their activities or set conditions that go against their values: *"I would demonstrate without authorization. I mean, the reason we exist is the pursual of equal rights, freedom, and respect. If you don't allow me to do that, I won't smile and act like everything's okay"* (Interview 1), thus emphasizing the intention to resist any top-down attempt to openly depoliticize their action. In fact, there have been multiple occasions in the past when confrontation has been necessary for their voice to be heard: *"I have flipped desks in public offices when they needed to be flipped"* (Interview 5).

During the 2019 edition of the Sardegna Pride, local authorities demanded a payment of €7,500 to cover the expenses of police overtime, with the implication that the Pride march was a commercial event rather than a public demonstration organized by volunteer citizens (Interview 3). This resulted in Arc appealing in court against the municipal police and mobilizing other friendly organizations and the press in their support: *"This thing was completely unconstitutional [...]. But we had our backs covered. Europe mobilized. Other organizations from abroad took interest in this. Constitutionalists…everybody called us. We ended up in the newspapers and within a week we raised €15,000 in donations!"* (Interview 5). This incident is also significant in terms of Arc's holistic and intersectional interpretation of the struggle for justice and equality, which is reflected in many of its activities from street protests to cultural initiatives (Arc, 2021). These values arguably disprove the critique advanced by NGO-ization literature on the lack of class dimension in LGBTQ+ initiatives such as pride marches (Bilić, 2016). In fact, a board member recalls their exchange with the police commissioner:

You've stumbled upon us, who have the power and the courage to shame you in the newspapers, but those who don't have a home, nor money, nor an organization behind them, nor 30,000 people who can spare one euro, what should they do? [...] Our battle served everybody. (Interview 5)

Overall, these claims can be linked to those of the late 1990s overarching youth-led mobilization, as analyzed by Meyer (2009) in relation to Lefebvrian definitions of radical action, that informed the vision of Arc's founders (Interview 3).

Moreover, elements of resistance to professionalization can be found in the strictly volunteer and donation-based character of Arc's activity. As explained by a board member, the option of employing external personnel like many similar organizations in Italy are doing, has been rejected on the conclusion that *"their work isn't your own"* (Interview 1), thus implying that the fundamental values and goals of Arc would be "*distorted*" (Interview 1) if volunteer contributions were to be replaced with salaried assignments (Interview 2; Interview 5). This intention can also be identified around the participation in the call for tenders for the counseling service, as described in the previous section, which was carefully chosen on the basis that the project "*perfectly aligned*" (Interview 2) with their activities and the terms and conditions allowed enough autonomy in its management (Interview 6). In fact, the president explains that the organization is very aware of the consequences linked to relying on external funds,

especially in relation to their most properly political activity. Thus, Arc has taken a clear stance against the potential cooptation of their action:

> *When there is a direct public intervention by a representative of the administration, there's a risk of putting a mark on the initiative. Thus, for example, we never requested funds for the Pride. We have only been allocated grants through public calls for cultural initiatives, etc. […]. Apart from that, we've always been self-funded, either through our members, crowdfunding, self-financing parties, etc. (Interview 3)*

Speaking of Pride, another board member adds that Arc has always carefully avoided the commodification of the event in order to preserve its "*political significance*" over consumeristic motives: *"We receive very small sponsorships from local businesses […]. Mostly citizens from the area who want to support us, but we don't accept big sponsors like most national and international Prides"* (Interview 6).

The characteristics, values, and goals of the organization described above underpin the decision to maintain independence from the national LGBTQ+ network "Arcigay" and resist patterns of NGO-ization: *"Arc has always cared a lot about its own identity... also in an attempt to be less institutionalized. Arcigay has a well-defined apex, it functions in a very pyramidal way, […] whereas Arc is an independent organization that has never worked in that way"* (Interview 2). In fact, the network has expanded its membership base through affiliated venues that require their customers to subscribe to the organization in order to access their services (Arcigay, 2021b). Thus, while Arcigay has overall undergone a process of commodification of the LGBTQ+ cause, Arc wants to ensure that prospective members approach the organization to *"embark on a political journey of political claims, of struggle for equal rights and community-building, rather than for commercial reasons"* (Interview 3). Moreover, according to Arc's activists these structural features have "*flattened*" political claims and demands (Interview 3; Interview 4), and "*led to Arcigay's relevance being very much based on their willingness to make major compromises with parliament and government-level politics*" (Interview 6). To a certain extent, participants agree that the "*partial conquest*" represented by the obtainment of civil unions in 2016 as a result of the negotiations between political representatives and Arcigay (Interview 6), has led to a fragmentation of claims between: *"those who said, 'it's a step forward' and those, including us, who said 'the hell, a step forward!'"* (Interview 1). This has also largely resulted in the depoliticization of the national network (Interview 3; Interview 4), which is in line with literary critiques (Bilić & Stubbs, 2015;

Bernstein, 2015; Podmore, 2015). In this context, the distance from Arcigay further proves Arc's intention to safeguard its transformative potential and properly political relevance until equality is fully achieved.

Finally, it can be claimed that the way Arc has negotiated 'the right to the city' for the LGBTQ+ community of Cagliari in the local political, social, and cultural context has been based on a certain degree of instrumentalization of institutions. The acquisition of Arc's premises is arguably the most striking example of this dynamic, as the organization participated in a call intended for cultural associations in possession of library collections with the aim of expanding the "*urban public library archive*" (Comune di Cagliari, 2016). While for Arc the promotion of LGBTQ+ literature "*is one of the instruments along with hundreds of others for doing political activism*" (Interview 1), it has also emerged that "*the media library was a pretext to participate in the call. Arc was created for another purpose, absolutely*" (Interview 4). In fact, the premises allocated to the organization are also used for a variety of social and political activities, including hosting the plenaries of other friendly organizations (Interview 3). Additionally, in the early years, Arc's members who at the time were university students would de facto redirect funding from the university into the organization:

> *We created some mock associations to participate in calls and get funding for activities, although they had to be aimed at university students [...]. So, we would present it as a single event for students, instead, it was one within a range of other events organized by Arc.* (Focus Group)

Overall, while cooperating with the authorities has been a necessary compromise for the growth of the organization in political legitimacy and visibility, the activists have also been able to repurpose these interactions for their own aims. Several administrations, especially during election campaigns, have attempted to gain public support through pinkwashing practices thus contacting the organization for initiatives in support of LGBTQ+ rights such as the installation of rainbow benches (Interview 5). Arc has strategically welcomed these requests: "*they got their bench, we took pictures, the press was there…they used me, and I used them. [...] they were marketing themselves, but I also reached my own goal*" (Interview 5). Under similar circumstances, Arc has recently been approached by the municipality of Quartu Sant' Elena, a suburb of Cagliari, for their support in the creation of the first local department of LGBTQ+ affairs in Italy. Thus, while navigating structural obstacles to transformation and disengaged political administrations, the instrumentalization of these interactions has allowed

Arc to achieve some remarkable goals for the promotion of equality, the fight against discrimination, and the creation of safe spaces for the LGBTQ+ community of Cagliari and beyond.

Conclusion

This research aimed to explore patterns of depoliticization in post-Cold War activism as well as to contribute to the multifaceted debate on NGO-ization with an in-depth case study-based analysis. Overall, the problematic nature of the dichotomy highlighted in relation to the definition of radical action by depoliticization scholars is further confirmed in light of the findings of this study. In fact, the implication that societal transformation can exclusively be assumed in the presence of overtly antagonistic, heroic acts-based, disruptive politics denigrates the social, cultural, and consequently political impact of small-scale grassroots experiences of emancipatory social action.

On the one hand, the experience of Arc further confirms that patterns of depoliticization cannot be generalized nor assumed as universal tendencies by the literature. In fact, the organization has largely preserved the foundational values and aims that animated the political militancy of its founders while having to adjust to context-based constraints to societal transformation and respond to macro-level changes. Hence, it can be claimed that activists have not lost their radical potential, but rather have redefined radical action in light of different historical and cultural times.

On the other hand, this study confirms that defining and assessing radical action cannot be alienated from context. While the organization's growth, structure, and strategy present elements that can be linked to a certain degree of NGO-ization, namely institutionalization, professionalization, and loss of political radicality as defined by post-politics scholars, the latter have not significantly prevented Arc from achieving important results in terms of cultural advancement, societal awareness, as well as political and legislative impact. On the contrary, this case highlights that a certain level of cooperation with institutions and authorities is not only inevitable but also productive for the attainment of the activists' goals, especially in particularly hostile cultural and political contexts. In fact, the success of Arc significantly relies on the organization's ability to not only establish good ties with friendly political representatives but also to recognize opportunities in adverse environments and instrumentalize them for the advancement of the LGBTQ+ cause.

Overall, the study represents an opportunity to explore the development of activities, claims, and goals in local-scale LGBTQ+ activism and, to a broader extent, social movements claiming the right to the city, as well as for evaluating which strategies have a stronger impact on specific contexts in the creation of a more inclusive and egalitarian community. The experience of Arc offers an example of how activists negotiate their political legitimacy and advance their claims in institutional spaces while attempting to preserve the values that animate their struggle. Arc's horizontal structure based on the principles of inclusivity and democracy, its effort to respond to a multifaceted community through self-education and self-reflexivity initiatives, as well as the ability to discern threats to societal transformation from opportunities for advancement have emerged as the organization's greatest strengths. Going forward, Arc should focus on seeking dialogue with government-level institutions and fully taking advantage of the visibility and political legitimacy it has gained through twenty years of activity to advance the fight for equality at a national level and overcome the post-civil unions' bill impasse. Internally, the organization should continue to prioritize self-awareness and self-education through (intergenerational) dialogue-based practices in order to avoid fragmentation of claims and loss of representativeness of the ever-evolving LGBTQ+ movement.

A more comprehensive analysis of Arc's case study would have been possible through a long-term ethnography based on the observation of the organization's activities, interactions with authorities and institutions as well as the internal decision-making process and action planning during plenaries and strategy meetings. This would have largely allowed for a more nuanced understanding of NGO-ization and depoliticization patterns and how the latter influence transformative potential. Additionally, the analysis would have included the observation of all active members thus increasing the overall representativeness and validity of the study. However, this approach was not possible due to the scope of this project, namely the availability of time and resources, and the location of the author. Nonetheless, first-hand participation of the author in several of Arc's activities throughout the years has indirectly contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the organization's impact and growth.

Overall, despite methodological limitations, the research fulfills the promise to enrich the theoretical debate on the depoliticization of urban activism with context-based nuanced observations. Moreover, this study provides the activists of Arc and beyond with a deeper understanding of macro-level challenges to their transformative potential with the aim of guiding them through collective action planning. The example of Arc will hopefully inspire newly born organizations to survive and thrive in politically, institutionally, and culturally hostile contexts in their struggle for the emancipation of the LGBTQ+ community.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

TOPICS	QUESTIONS
INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS:	How did you become involved with the organization?
	What is your role in it and for how long have you volunteered for Arc?
The establishment of the organization and its activist network	What are the origins of the organization and how was the idea of LGBTQ+ activism in Cagliari organized at the start?
	How has the organizational structure evolved over the years?
	What are the main goals of Arc for the LGBTQ+ community, according to you?
Arc and other (LGBTQ+) organizations, collective mobilization, networking	What are the reasons for the lack of affiliation to the national network "Arcigay"? Are there mainly geographical or rather political and ideological reasons?
	Was there ever an attempt to align with their nation-scale initiatives?
	What is the role of Arc in the Sardinian LGBTQ+ activist context? In case of large-scale initiatives such as the annual pride, how does Arc cooperate with other (LGBTQ+) organizations? How are decisions negotiated at an inter-organizational regional level?
Decision-making within the organization	What are the duties and responsibilities of the board?
	How are decisions taken within the organization?
	How are regular members included, if at all, included in the decision process in terms of action/event-planning?
The in-house activities organized by Arc	What type of in-house cultural/educational/community-based activities does Arc offer? E.g., counseling services; film screenings; festivals, library services.

	How has the public response/participation to these activities evolved throughout the years?
	Do you think these activities have an emancipatory potential for the local community and beyond? In what way?
The urban initiatives organized/co-organized by Arc	What activities does Arc organize in the urban space of Cagliari? E.g., pride parades; sit-ins; protests in response to politically relevant events.
	How has the public response/participation to these activities evolved throughout the years?
	Do you think these activities have an emancipatory potential for the local community and beyond? In what way?
Relationships with local institutions and authorities	How did the organization negotiate the acquisition of its premises with the local municipality?
	What kind of struggles, if any, did the organization experience in the obtainment of public funding/institutional support to its activities in relation to Arc's event agenda?
	How are different initiatives carried out by the organization received by the authorities? Are there particular instances of initiatives for which it has been harder to cooperate with institutions? Do you think having to negotiate with them has limited the radical potential of the organization or compromised its foundational values?
CONCLUSION:	Overall, do you think that Arc has had a transformative impact in bettering the life of the LGBTQ+ community in Cagliari? How do you think it should improve to achieve its goals?
	Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix B: List of Interviewees

Interview 1	Member of Arc since 2003, board member since 2020, and previously spokesperson.
Interview 2	Member of Arc since 2010, board member since 2015, and previously secretary.
Interview 3	President and co-founder of Arc since 2002.
Interview 4	Member of Arc since 2013 and board member since 2020.
Interview 5	Member of Arc since 2004 and board member since 2020.
Interview 6	Member of Arc since 2012 and board member since 2020.
Focus Group	Five members of Arc with different levels of experience as volunteers (from one to ten years). Participants in different task groups (counseling, youth group, cultural initiatives, and network initiatives).