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On the common sense of social reproduction: Social assistance and ideologies of care in austerity Europe

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Abstract
In this article, we examine the mobilization, justification, and enactment of ideologies of care and social reproduction in the field of religious charity-based social assistance in Italy and Portugal under austerity. Our framework combines the feminist critique of the naturalization of gendered inequalities with Gramsci's notion of common sense. Drawing on ethnographic research in two mid-size cities in Italy (Brindisi) and Portugal (Setúbal), we address, from a comparative perspective, changes in the model of welfare redistribution enhanced by implementing austerity policies. We aim to illuminate how the gendered domestic sphere and the expansion of religious charities under austerity are tight together through ideologies of care and social reproduction, becoming operative in the concrete management of welfare redistribution and integral to the implementation and legitimation of emerging austerity welfare regimes. Focusing on the everyday and mundane tasks of charity work, we show the existence of a relational continuum between the gendered domestic sphere and charity voluntary work. We provide evidence of how naturalized visions and patterns of care inherent in family ideologies are transferred into the sphere of social assistance, hence recasting as moral and practical regulatory principles of welfare distribution. Finally, we show how the common sense of social reproduction ultimately becomes instrumental in the regressive naturalization of poverty at the core of the exclusionary and discriminatory patterns of welfare distribution.

Keywords Austerity, Charity, Common sense, Ideologies of care, Social reproduction, Europe

Introduction

In this article, we examine the mobilization, justification, and enactment of ideologies of care and social reproduction in the field of religious charity-based social assistance in Italy and Portugal under austerity. We define ideologies of care and social reproduction as the ideas, conceptions, and representations establishing who is worthy of care and social reproductive resources, those that should take responsibility for the work of providing them, and the contexts and settings in which they should be given and received. We aim to illuminate how the gendered domestic sphere and the expansion of religious charities under austerity are tight together through ideologies of care and social reproduction and how the latter become operative in the concrete management of welfare redistribution. We argue that care and social reproduction ideologies are integral to implementing and legitimizing emerging austerity welfare regimes. Furthermore, we explore their effectiveness in obscuring and regulating welfare disentitlement through inequalities, differentiations, and the production of hierarchies of worth among disenfranchised parcels of the population.

We think and analyze the ideologies of care and social reproduction through feminist critical perspectives, focusing on the "naturalization" of gendered inequalities (Federici 2020; Fraser 2016; Mezzadri 2019; Mies 1986; Young et al. 1981) as a constitutive aspect of those ideologies, and through Gramsci's notion of common sense. We approach common sense as the concrete ground to examine the historical effectiveness of ideologies and their grip on everyday life as implicit and explicit practical orientations. Despite the conceptual continuities and linkages between Gramsci's notion of common sense and the feminist analysis of processes of naturalization,[1] as far as we know, the advantages of their joint deployment in the anthropological analysis have been underestimated. The radical critique of the reproductive sphere as a distinct gendered domain can fruitfully expand the analytical potentials of common sense as the operative ground where ideologies are successfully disseminated as "the most widespread conception of life and morals" (Gramsci 1975: 76). Critical feminism, in other words, provides the main perspective to think about the ideologies of care and social reproduction, while common sense helps us to think how these ideologies work and operate in the concrete practices that we have ethnographically recorded and that are here examined.

Feminist critical perspectives on social reproduction have focused on the "denaturalization" of exclusionary and gendered oppressive binaries operating through vari- ous spheres of social life, including the household versus the workplace, the public and the private, reproductive and productive work, and kin and non-kin. The category of gender and a focus on reproduction were crucial to bringing about a greater degree of complexity, broadly enabling to signal the determinant relevance of the contextual, historically bounded cultural idioms underpinning the naturalization of overlapping modes of causality and their contradictory dynamics within different senses of reproduction (Harris and Young 1981). For instance,

1 See Gramsci's reflections on "naturalness" (*naturalità*) as a critical point of the struggle around defini- tions of the "obvious and simple" and as one of the forefronts of the struggle towards the achievement of "an autonomous historical consciousness" of the subaltern groups (Gramsci 1975: 1875).

Yanagisako and Delaney's seminal work (1995) addressed the culturally embedded relations between ideologies of naturalization, structural inequalities, and the institutionalization of hierarchies of status and power. The authors articulated how unequal power relations appear as "natural, inevitable, god-given" and the various means through which doxic truths (Bourdieu 1977) are brought about by myths of origin, key symbols, rituals, or master narratives.

Following Gramsci, we think of common sense as the fragmentary collection of taken-for-granted understandings and ideas through which people perceive and act on the world around them (see Crehan 2016). The ideologies of care and social reproduction play a crucial role in knitting together the fragmentary universe of common sense, grounding the "naturalness" (Gramsci 1975: 1875) of fundamental inequalities in the everyday "facts of life" (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995). At any given historical moment, this renders common sense a "material force" mobilized to support potentially different political and economic projects (Hall 1988). Thus, common sense is not just the debased repository of ideological constructions. It is also the binding site of articulation between the ideologies of care and social reproduction and the differentiated continuum of practices and meanings through which charity volunteers think, feel, and act within fields of forces and material constraints. Hence, the concept of common sense lays the ground to think about the given "naturalness" of ideologies of care and social reproduction. At the same time, it allows us to trace connections between the worldliness of everyday life experience and the wider contradictory reproduction of social relations into larger historical collectivities, national communities, and states formations.

The anthropological literature has addressed the relationships between welfare transformations, care, and citizenship under neoliberal austerity regimes. Muehlebach's (2012) research on voluntary work in Northern Italy highlights the state's mobilization of an ethics of care among ordinary people to legitimize wel- fare state retrenchment and an emerging unequal grid for valuing distinct forms of care work, with unpaid community-based caring solidarities being overvalued and the paid caring work of migrant domestic workers being undervalued. Cabot's (2016) research in austerity Greece among networks of community-based clinics/ pharmacies analyzes the remaking of Greek citizenship through care as an idiom of social solidarity. A special issue edited by Koch and James (2022) brings together a group of works grounded on different European case studies focused on examining the links between the shift towards austerity, the role of advice organizations, and emerging ethical relationships. For instance, Gutierrez Garza (2022) examines the everyday work of a Spanish collective movement which emerged to provide sup- port to evicted people. The political activists function as advisers/brokers acting as agents of resistance against the state's subordination to the interests of the private sector and as agents who promote an ethic of collective care, aiming to recuperate the social and citizenship rights eroded by austerity politics. This literature signals how an ethics of care (Tronto 1993) has been deployed to reinforce and challenge the underlying premises of neoliberal citizenship and austerity welfare regimes (Thelen 2021). This article adopts the processual conceptualization of care developed by Thelen (2015). The author calls for a focus on how care practices, which distinctively involve the definition, negotiation, and valuation of human needs and their particular embedding in larger and situated institutional and political realms, con- tribute to

shaping the creation, maintenance, or dissolution of significant social relationships, with the potential to promote social stability or change. Thelen's approach to care as an open-ended process enables us to retain the ambivalence of care as a productive nexus of inquiry. By this, we mean addressing the situated and embed- ded interaction of the conservative and generative dimensions of care and paying attention to their specific outcomes, focusing on how they connect discrete spheres of social life, including those about welfare reconfigurations, charity, and care. In particular, we are interested in eliciting how ideologies of care and social reproduction mediate the dynamics of charity-based social assistance and their consequences for reinforcing or challenging the legitimacy of austerity welfare at a broader level.

In our case studies, we focus on the everyday and mundane tasks of charity work, from evaluating claimants' requests, advice, and counseling to managing soup kitchens and food distribution. We show the existence of a relational continuum (Thelen et al. 2017) between the gendered domestic sphere and voluntary charity work. We provide evidence of how naturalized visions and patterns of care inherent in fam- ily ideologies are transferred into the sphere of social assistance, hence recast as moral and practical regulatory principles of welfare distribution. In our analysis, we address two main ways in which ideologies of care and social reproduction are articulated in the common sense and organizational practices of food charity distribution: one producing hierarchies of worth among the poor population, according to normative models of social reproduction and livelihood improvement, and another shaping spheres of proximity, from "natural," intimate, and spontaneous caregiving to the non-binding, semi-bureaucratized, charity commitment.

Our analysis is based on ethnographic research in two mid-size cities in Italy (Brindisi) and Portugal (Setúbal), with about 88,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, respectively. Our ethnographic contexts share a similar trajectory of development through the expansion of heavy industry in the 1960s and accelerated impoverish- ment from the 1980s onward due to factory closures, downsizing, and mass unem- ployment. At the same time, Brindisi and Setúbal also represent specificities pertaining to different national territorial relations. Setúbal has been for a long time an integral part of the greater metropolitan area of Lisbon and expresses the high degree of Portuguese centralization, while Brindisi is a provincial city of southern Italy, illustrative of the relative polycentric character of the Italian territory within the general dualism between the more affluent Center North and the impoverished south. In the next section, we provide a comparative outlook on implementing austerity policies in Portugal and Italy, focusing on shifting modalities of welfare distribution and the growing prominence of secular and religious organizations in the administration and regulation of welfare provisioning.

Austerity and charity in Southern Europe

The Italian and Portuguese trajectories provide an excellent example of *convergent differences* in the national articulation of austerity policies within the European con- text (Alves de Matos and Pusceddu 2021). In the aftermath of the 2008 financial meltdown, the European Union adopted more binding budgetary rules to tackle the cracks in the financial system. This was nonetheless undertaken along

lines that reminded the different — and yet convergent — structural positions of the coun- tries of Southern Europe. In Italy, still one of the largest economies of the EU and a founding member of the European Economic Community (EEC, Treaty of Rome, 1957), austerity policies were implemented through a form of soft diplomacy, while Portugal, a smaller and economically weaker country that joined the EEC in 1986, was compelled to adopt a structural adjustment program under the supervision of the infamous Troika (i.e., European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund). In our field sites, shifting modalities of austerity welfare redistribution were tied to the parallel development of increasing public expenditure cuts and the growing prominence of third sector organizations in the administration and regulation of basic welfare provisioning and food distribution. In addition, organizations associated with the Catholic church became increasingly prominent in fulfilling and regulating welfare needs.

Portugal signed a 4-year structural adjustment program with the Troika in May 2011. The 78-billion-euro bailout was conditional upon severe cuts to state spend- ing, which entailed harsh tax increases and the reduction of welfare benefits. Moreover, like other countries on the indebted periphery of the Eurozone, Portuguese policies involved measures of "internal devaluation" (Blyth 2013) — wage repression, precarious employment, and mass unemployment — contributing to the most violent and rapid transfer of income from labor to capital in democratic Portugal (Reis 2014).

Austerity policies accelerated a process of welfare neoliberalization ongoing since the 1990s (Hespanha 2000). Within the context of a broader governmental narrative focused on the imperative of "reforming the state and its functions," in 2011, the Program of Social Emergency (2011 and 2014) was launched by the Ministry of Solidarity and Social Security with the aim of "fighting the lack of efficiency" (in-state redistributive practices) and "changing the paradigm of social response to severe material deprivation." The program targeted specific population segments (e.g., impoverished households, long-term unemployed, elderly, and disabled per- sons). In addition, it laid out several policy projects to be carried out in partnership with third sector institutions and civil society organizations, including the Program of Food Emergency, to expand the network of soup kitchens — the food charity scheme analyzed in the next section is a part of this program. Consequently, the number of soup kitchens in Portugal skyrocketed from 62 in 2011 to 843 in 2015.

While state expenditure was dramatically reduced, particularly non-contributory social transfers, state funding to the third sector grew (Joaquim 2015). The program of social emergency prominently benefited third sector institutions through increased state budget funding; speed-up of the simplification of legal procedures associated with equipment acquisition; state funding training for third sector management directors; and a micro-credit exclusive line to third sector institutions. Moreover, the program of social emergency implied a shift in the model and logic of welfare redistribution, with the state delegating its responsibilities to the third sector while reinforcing a broader philosophy of charity and poor relief in welfare provisioning.

Labor deregulation, welfare cuts, and increasing conditionality accelerated severe destitution and impoverishment, which affected the poorest of the poor (Rodrigues 2016). In 2012, according to the National Institute of Statistics (INE 2012), within

a total active population of five million, 826,900 persons were unemployed (15%); 217,400 persons were "inactive available to work" (i.e., "discouraged" from looking for work); and 261,000 were "underemployed" (i.e., working involuntarily in low-paid part-time positions). More than one million people were either unemployed or living in conditions of heightened labor precarity. Even before the austerity policies, Portugal was already one of the more unequal European countries regarding income distribution. Austerity reinforced this pattern, affecting, in particular, the disposable income of the poorest 10% of households (Carmo et al. 2014).

Between 2015 and 2016, in Setúbal, Patrícia followed the food charity activities tied to the church of one of the most impoverished parishes, concentrating more than 40% of the local population.[2] Patrícia followed the organization, administration, and regulation of two food charity schemes. One tied to the distribution and delivery of monthly food baskets, and another described by the church priest as a "socially progressive form of providing for material needs and social inclusion" designated as "social refectory." Patrícia participated and observed the pragmatics of both schemes and the logic and bureaucratic interactions governing the church volunteers' decision-making processes on granting food charity to claimants.

Two particular dynamics shaped food distribution, expressing the growing bureaucratization of assistance and its increasing moralization. First, church volunteers deployed a bureaucracy of needs identification, which replicated, to a certain extent, how state welfare provisioning checks the validity of claimants' needs. Volunteers guided their evaluation of claimants' needs based on factors considered to be objective and transparent, thus less prone to arbitrariness, such as a maxi- mum household monthly income of 750 euros after deduction of expenses. They explained that this method for defining the claimants' financial livelihood condition was helpful given the increasing number of households' requests experiencing rapid impoverishment and decline. Volunteers often stressed that they could not help everyone but only those considered to be in "real need." Accessing how much money income a claimant's household was able to retain after deducting expenses was one way of asserting "real need." After checking the claimant's household income, volunteers would consult a grid elaborated by the church priest. This grid indicated the amount paid for each meal at the social refectory, with meal prices ranging from 10 cents to 4 euros.

The second dynamic concerned the moralities of deservingness put into effect by volunteers in their valuations of the claimants' perceived behavior failures and moral character deficiencies. As it will be analyzed further ahead, this was a crucial instrument through which volunteers built artificial divisions among the growing poor population, enabling volunteers to classify, rank, and enact a "hierarchy of worth" which defined the value and legitimacy of the claimants' needs. Poor people were broadly valued and evaluated according to an emic typology ranging from the "professional" to the "new" poor. Professional poor were considered manipulative and false, encompassing those that knew how to cheat the system and combine different sources of distributive resources networks for their benefit. The new poor had fallen into poverty for reasons outside their control, including unemployment, divorce, or debt (e.g., "they don't know how and where to ask for help, and are too ashamed to do it"). The frequent distrust volunteers showed towards charity

2 Corresponding to roughly 50,000 inhabitants.

claimants (e.g., “they lie to us, hide things from us”) was intertwined with the moralization of poor people’s public behavior, money management skills, household organization capabilities, and personal character failings.

In Italy, the implementation of austerity measures followed a slightly different path. The “strictly confidential” letter the ECB (European Central Bank) delivered to the Italian government in August 2011 (made public in September) listed several structural reforms (including the liberalization and privatization of public services and revision of welfare and labor legislations) “to be implemented as soon as possible.” This informal memorandum ultimately set the political conditions for the government change with the appointment of former EU commissioner Mario Monti. The latter chaired the so-called technocratic government that outstripped the austerity policies of the previous cabinet. As a result, a package of controversial measures was approved at the end of 2011 to reduce the budget deficit and improve the country’s competitiveness by cutting public expenditure, reforming the pension system, and increasing labor flexibilization and indirect taxation. Austerity politics intensified the neoliberal restructuring of previous decades, starting in the 1990s with large-scale privatization of public assets, welfare reforms, labor deregulation, and a robust fiscal austerity program (Cozzolino 2021).

The social consequences of austerity measures were dramatic, with growing unemployment, social insecurity, and deprivation (Caritas Italiana 2016). Austerity politics also had diversified repercussions, increasing the divide between the richer and export-oriented economies of center-northern regions and the weaker southern economies. In the latter, unemployment rates doubled from 8% in 1977 to 17.2% in 2012, registering a far higher increase than in the center and north of the country — respectively, from 5.5 to 9.5% and from 5.8 to 7.4% (ISTAT 2013). In Brindisi, the situation was bleak, as the national census (ISTAT 2011) registered 20.3% of unemployment, higher than the regional rate (17.3%) and almost doubled the national rate (11.4%). In 2015, the job centers recorded 30% of the active population searching for employment. Likewise, the combination of welfare retrenchment and decentralization intensified the territorial inequalities in terms of welfare provisions — from social assistance to health care (Pusceddu 2022).

Between 2015 and 2016, Antonio volunteered in the Caritas soup kitchen and followed advice delivery and food distribution in the parish church of peripheral neighborhoods. The soup kitchen was located in the city center and was directly managed by the diocesan Caritas.[3] Many recipients were foreign immigrants and asylum seekers. They were also largely present in another downtown parish Caritas, which supplied staples, clothing, and other assistance to foreign families and individuals. On the contrary, the smaller parishes in the peripheral neighborhoods attended mostly local recipients, thus confirming how the austerity crisis was hit- ting the poorer areas on the city’s outskirts. Since requests for assistance had been increasing since the onset of the financial crisis, the scarcity of resources became the critical issue around which the well-established distinction between deserving and undeserving poor was re-articulated (Tošić and Streinzer 2022), along the lines of social and national (if not “racial”) proximity.

Caritas volunteers pointed out the increase in requests for assistance compared to previous years, emphasizing the appearance of a new type of claimant, often charac-

3 According to the territorial church organization, the diocesan Caritas of Brindisi and Ostuni is the administrative entity on which all Caritas groups based in the parish churches depend.

terized as being "not the usual poor." Like in the Portuguese case described above, all too often, volunteers described these "new poor" as the involuntary victims of "the crisis," who experienced poverty as a process of "social disqualification" (Paugam 2005). These were workers who lost their jobs, bankrupt petty entrepreneurs, or shopkeepers who never thought or needed to resort to Caritas help and were hardly expected to do so. Unlike their Portuguese counterparts, however, Italian volunteers would also point out the growing presence of "immigrants and refugees," putting further strain on Caritas' limited resources. Volunteers complained about the scant support provided by municipal social services. Local public institutions — the volunteers complained — tended to delegate to Caritas services. Municipal social workers admitted that sending people not formally qualified for public social assistance to Caritas services for immediate assistance was often easier.

The volunteers' complaints reflected broader dynamics on the national scale. The number of people living below the poverty line steadily increased during the austerity crisis (Caritas 2015, 2016; ISTAT 2017; Saraceno 2015). The expansion of poverty made more acute the effects of national welfare reforms. Like elsewhere in Europe, in Italy, structural welfare reforms started to be implemented in the 1990s (Ascoli and Pavolini 2015), with public expenditures cut and the decentralization of welfare to different layers and actors of local society (public and private). The unbalanced reform of the new welfare mix, not supported by adequate financial transfers from the central state, had a strong territorial impact on the quality of services provided, enhancing the historical dualism between the poorer south and the richer north (Andreotti and Mingione 2016; Fargion 1996). In Brindisi, as we show below, volunteers understood the readiness of local public institutions "to delegate" to Caritas as the "blurring of roles" between the state's prerogative to vouch for social protection — thus entailing the obligation to provide fair livelihood opportunities to all citizens — and their charitable effort to relieve the most deprived. This tension gave rise to contradictory understandings of the voluntary work entailed in dealing with the state's outsourcing of food distribution to charities and its resulting bureaucracies. Expressing their reluctance to always accept the workload that charity commitment started to entail, volunteers mobilized definitions of entitlement to charity service and welfare distribution that rested upon ideas of proximity shaped by the powerful metaphors of the family and the nation.

The austerity conjuncture in Portugal and Italy reconfigured the fields of social protection, with catholic charities rising in prominence. This was facilitated by the differential, yet similar, historical legacy of the Catholic Church in shaping the development of social assistance, in both countries, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[4] Catholic charity volunteers developed strategies to cope with the rising number of food requests, the growing strain arising from a perceived delegation of state responsibilities onto charities, and the scarcity of resources. Volunteers' actions, perceptions, and explanations of these shifts were informed by ideologies of care and social reproduction and the latter's articulation with the common

4 The anthropological literature on charity emphasizes how charitable relationships and the moral vocabularies underpinning volunteers' caring motivations and actions are framed by the intersection of context, history, shifting models of citizenship and belonging, and local distributive models (e.g., Allahyari 2000; Caldwell 2004; Dorondel and Popa 2014).

sense of family, proximity, and normative models of livelihood improvement and deservingness.

Hierarchies of worth in Portugal

The research in Setúbal shows how normative models of social reproduction and livelihood improvement inform charity volunteers' ethics and care practices, ultimately defining and establishing a hierarchy of worth among the poor population. By normative models of social reproduction and livelihood improvement, we mean the dominant ideological frameworks defining how best to ensure livelihood prosperity across generations. These are embedded within broader transitions of the recent history of Portugal and linked to specific configurations of kin, class, and generation. Even though these frameworks may not correspond with empirical reality, they have a strong ideological persistence. Moreover, they have real effects on people's lives because they are embedded in powerful common sense ideas about how to escape poverty through pursuing a socially recognized family livelihood and fashioning oneself as a worthy community member.

The great majority of the church volunteers were women in their mid-60s and 70s. They performed different tasks within the church: cleaning common spaces, arranging and preparing the monthly food baskets, conducting interviews with charity claimants, and serving meals in the social refectory. All female church volunteers shared a successful trajectory of escape from poverty and necessity through the practical articulation of a strong ethic of hard work, investment in the well-being of the nuclear family, and adherence to the kinship obligation of fulfilling their upward social mobility aspirations for their children. On the other hand, all female interlocutors mentioned the experience of hunger due to the irregular wages and lack of resources of their rural landless parents, the lack of possibilities of studying beyond primary or elementary school, or the experience of starting working at twelve or fourteen in agriculture to help the household survive.

Laurinda's trajectory is illustrative.[5] She was one of the most active volunteers in the church. When Patrícia met her in 2015, she was sixty-one. She was born in the south of Portugal, Alentejo, a region historically shaped by deep social inequalities between large estate landowners and rural propertyless laborers. "When I was eleven, my mother sent me to harvest oysters," she once remarked. When she was fourteen, she migrated to Setúbal, in those days experiencing a cycle of industrial development and growing employment opportunities. Having completed primary education, she started working in a paper factory as an unqualified worker. She was called after 20 years by the company's director to assist with administrative and secretarial functions, later becoming his principal secretary. During this time, she underwent several training courses provided by the factory and completed secondary school by attending night classes. She left the factory after 45 years of work. She always recounted with joy her 40 years of marriage, the family she had built, and her pride in her son, daughter, and grandsons, mainly because "they have had a better life than mine." The "better life" of their children and grandchildren was the out- come of her hard work, strong family values, and "sacrificial" devotion to the project of continual investment in livelihood improvement across generations. In line with what other volunteers reported,

5 The names of our interlocutors in both field sites have been anonymized.

Laurinda's primary motivations for volunteering at the church were grounded in her willingness to remain active after retirement, doing something "good for the community," as she once told me, while still being able to provide care assistance to her grandsons when needed. With time, however, it became increasingly clear that volunteers' moral motivations were also tied to the symbolic capital acquired vis-à-vis other parish community members and knowledge of institutional actors with a certain degree of influence in the local space.

Volunteers go through a one-year training with social workers from Caritas, learning about applicable legal frameworks, state welfare procedures, and how to collect and analyze claimants' data. This gave them formal and informal knowledge of how to deal with the procedures and paperwork of each institution. It also gave volunteers access to persons in these same institutions whom they could rely upon for a special request or privileged information. Volunteers' motivations were grounded in moral, affective, and instrumental reasons, which informed how they crafted themselves as virtuous persons (Allahyari 2000). In addition, volunteers enjoyed the social recognition afforded by their unpaid work at the church, which gave them a certain degree of power to extract information from different sources regarding potential claimants.

At Setúbal's church parish, to be granted access to food charity, claimants had first to schedule an interview with the church volunteers responsible for accessing and evaluating the livelihood conditions of those seeking to be helped by the church. These interviews are required to access the monthly food baskets and to be granted access to the social refectory. At this facility, charity recipients buy daily prepared meals for reduced prices, according to their household income level. Interviews last between 30 minutes to one hour, depending on the complexity of each case, and are framed by specific standardized procedures. First, claimants are inquired about the money coming into their household (including the formally declared income of all household members; the maximum threshold to gain access to food charity is set at 750 euros) and the regular expenses of the household (e.g., rent, utilities, medical expenses). Next, volunteers assert how much money income is left within the household after deducting all the obligatory expenses. After, they consult a grid elaborated by the church priest in collaboration with the Caritas services, following recommendations from the state social services, stipulating the meal prices of the social refectory.

Apart from these standardized procedures, moralities of deservingness mediated the volunteers' engagement with the claimants' requests by asserting distance or showing caring empathy. Such moralities express a long-lasting tendency to link poverty to individual failures and perceived moral character deficiencies (Katz 2013). Morally typifying the poor population according to the emic typology ranging from the "professional" to the "new" poor contributed broadly to the naturalization of poverty and to constructing and legitimizing value differentiations among the poor, their needs, claims, and entitlements (Alves de Matos 2022). Volunteers' moralities of deservingness partly reinforced the government's broader rhetoric and aim of restricting welfare support to "those who really needed" (i.e., morally deserving). However, within catholic charities, establishing "those that really needed" was not a straightforward task but rather a process in which care, morality, and natural- ized visions of improving one's livelihood conditions came into play. That is, how volunteers articulated and justified their moralities of

deservingness was not sim- ply a by-product of the government's political rhetoric and "architecture of need" (Hanney 2003: 7). Instead, volunteers' caring engagements with claimants and valuation of their needs were mediated by the socially embedded properties of their trajectories and naturalized models of social reproduction and livelihood improvement. Volunteers valued and qualified the legitimacy of the claimant's needs and entitlements according to naturalized conceptions and expectations. These included proper money management, hard work ethics, investment in children's education, patterns of motherhood and domestic work, behaving in the public sphere, and navigating the tensions between the instant rewards of conspicuous consumption and the morally superior value of deferral gratification.

In the interviews, after making the standardized questions about the household income and expenses, volunteers would often proceed to inquiry about the claimants' life trajectory, work experiences, domestic (including habits concerning food money management, consumption patterns, and meal preparations) and caring arrangements (including taking care of children and elderly), or the inter-generational distribution of welfare responsibilities within the household. Sometimes the questions were made in a manner which did not entail any implicit form of moral valuation (e.g., "who and where is the household food bought? Who prepares the meals? Do you buy any ready-made food?"), while other times it was, in fact, a directive of proper behavior disguised as a question (e.g., "At sixteen, why is your daughter not looking for work? Do you think it is advisable to spend money on cigarettes if you lack food at home?").

The practical enactment of the volunteer's ethics of care grounded on the "Christian love for your neighbor" was informed by embodied dispositions and taken-for-granted understandings concerning the proper models of domestic arrangements and projects of social reproduction within and outside the household. The latter were not only used by volunteers to value and evaluate the degree of deservingness of claimants, separating and differentiating those that fitted the models prescribed and those that did not. They also contributed to the production of deep-seated contradictions and tensions emerging from the everyday encounters between volunteers, charity claimants, and recipients. In particular, volunteers' common sense about how best to escape poverty was often at odds with the highly precarious and unstable livelihood patterns of those seeking food at the church. Such was represented, for instance, in the clash between volunteers' naturalization of the role of the nuclear family and the extended networks of mutual support for the circulation of valuable resources (e.g., food, favors, and information) through which many charity claimants and recipients were able to make ends meet. Alternatively, the constrained everyday work realities of single mothers prevented them from fitting the proper domestic arrangements in terms of healthy homemade food, imagined by volunteers as "the natural thing to do for your daughters." This was the case, for instance, of a young single mother that could not provide her two teenage daughters with homemade food of high proteinic qualities due to her dislocations between two different workplaces, with the result being that high caloric food, such as frozen pizza, was often the cheapest and fastest way of feeding her daughters.

Volunteers' valued models of social reproduction and livelihood improvement, mediating and informing the moralities of deservingness underpinning their charity work, are embedded in the recent history of Portugal. A history shaped by

the peripheral nature of the country's economy, reinforced by over 40 years under a corporatist and repressive authoritarian dictatorship (*Estado Novo* 1933–1974) and the accelerated integration into neoliberal patterns of accumulation following the Carnation revolution (1974) and adhesion to the EU (1986). The promises of freedom and modernity underpinned the revolutionary process and the European trajectory of catching up with the core. They were materialized in normative livelihood horizons towards middle-class distinction, which have retained a natural and taken- for-granted quality, despite (or perhaps because of) its attainability for many — as exemplified in the precarious livelihoods of those seeking food charity in Setúbal. The research in Setúbal suggests that normative models of social reproduction and livelihood improvement, grounded on common-sensical views about the centrality of the nuclear family, the proper domestic arrangements, and the allocation and distribution of caring responsibilities, exert a powerful ideological and regulatory function in the making of austerity welfare regimes, shaping and sustaining the legitimacy of unequal needs, claims, and entitlements. At a broader level, the volunteers' ethics and practices of care establish a hierarchy of worth, ultimately preventing poor people from escaping poverty and being able to acquire claiming capabilities.

Spheres of proximity in Italy

This section addresses the articulation of ideologies of care and social reproduction in the organizational practices of food charity distribution. It examines how such ideologies shape the common sense around what we designate as "spheres of proximity" organized around different and polarized conceptions of natural (hence bind- ing) care *and* voluntary (non-binding) charity commitment. By spheres of proximity, we mean a relational device defined by gradient notions of proximity, largely and discursively conveyed by the idea of blood ties (the family, the kindred) and their metaphorical meaning of belonging (the parish, the region, or the nation).

Towards the end of May 2016, Laura, a 54-year-old charity supervisor, summoned Antonio to help prepare and distribute meals at the soup kitchen. He had been volunteering regularly, making himself available whenever there was a shortage of personnel. The latter was usually composed of the volunteers of the national civil service (SCN) — a selected group of eight young persons who received a small stipend,[6] women who were also Caritas supervisors in their parish church and other less regular volunteers. On the weekends, each of the seventeen parish churches of the city was in charge of preparing the meals at the soup kitchen, providing food and voluntary work. Laura asked for Antonio's help since the diocesan Caritas super- visor had suddenly mobilized the SCN volunteers to attend the disembarkation of refugees rescued in the Mediterranean Sea. The rescue operations were part of the EU Frontex Agency Operation Triton.[7] Rescued refugees and

6 The Servizio Civile Nazionale (now renamed Servizio Civile Universale) is a governmental program for the annual recruitment of volunteers (18–28 years old), who can apply to any project among a list presented by private and public organizations, and approved by governmental agencies. In 2016, SCN volunteers received a monthly stipend of 433 euros for their twelve months of service.

7 Frontex is the European Union's border security agency. Operation Triton, under Italian control, lasted from November 2014 to February 2018 and then was replaced by Operation Themis.

migrants were disembarked in southern Italian ports and transferred to other cities and countries.

When Antonio arrived at the soup kitchen, Maria, the diocesan Caritas supervisor, insisted that he joins her to attend "the disembarkation" (*lo sbarco*), presented as the opportunity "to live a new experience."[8] There was excitement around the disembarkation. Volunteers eager to join in, like Laura, were not allowed since they were needed to prepare the meals at the soup kitchen. Laura asked Antonio to take some pictures so she could get an idea of "the disembarkation". Talking to young volunteers, the more experienced volunteers and supervisors depicted the disembarkation as a chance to meet "your neighbor" (*il tuo prossimo*), the unlucky and the rejected, the neglected humanity deserving unconditional love (*caritas*). The older caritas volunteers were not new to events of this kind. Brindisi, a port city along the southern Adriatic coastline, had been the first Italian city to cope with the inflow of twenty thousand refugees from Albania in March 1991. Caritas leaders recalled this "revelation of the needy" as a key event in the history and formation of the local Caritas. More in general, "the Albanians provided" a fundamental ingredient of the narrative of care and hospitality that nurtures local self-representations of the city as "welcoming."[9] However, despite the persistent evocation of this founding encounter, the relationships between charity volunteers and foreign immigrants and refugees were not devoid of tensions, suspicion, and even rejection (see Casati 2017). The soup kitchen, the only service that bound all parish churches together due to shifts, food provisioning, and financial management, was an important space where these controversial attitudes emerged, especially about the frequently raised problem of allocating scarce resources.

In 2015, the local Caritas registered a notable augment of assistance requests in the soup kitchen and in the other parishes that supplied regular food baskets. Since 2010, the consequences of the financial and economic crisis have been increasingly felt due to job losses and the weakness of local welfare services. As already noted, among volunteers, the idea that "it is the fault of the crisis" reflected the direct experience of dealing with a new type of recipients, commonly referred to as "the new poor." At the same time, the central parishes of the city and the soup kitchen, in particular, had to cope with the increasing requests for help from migrants and asylum seekers. The soup kitchen was a reference point for young male daily laborers, mostly from West African countries, many of whom moved seasonally across the south to toil in agriculture. In addition, asylum seekers relied on the diocesan Caritas for many services, including assistance in dealing with the intricacies of Italian bureaucracy.

The soup kitchen started in 1995 and initially operated only on Sundays. The original idea — one of the founders explained — was to provide a pedagogical opportunity to all parishioners to go beyond the material aspect of the meal (assistance) and focus instead on the moment of "sharing" (*condivisione*) as the authentic spirit of *caritas*. Promoting such moments of "sharing" in the soup kitchen, which incorporates the culturally meaningful idioms of food sharing, was thus aimed at creating spaces of spiritual involvement with the poor beyond

8 All the following passages are taken from recorded interviews or common expressions used by the volunteers.

9 Not surprisingly, the Caritas of Brindisi has a long track record of participating in cooperation and development projects in Albania and the Balkans.

material assistance. Starting with that pedagogical spirit, the soup kitchen was conceived as an opportunity to "teach the caring of your neighbor." The practical and spiritual experience of giving would trickle down to the many contexts of everyday life. Later in 2000, the service changed from weekly to daily, implying the multiplication of organizational and financial efforts. Nonetheless, the number of recipients remained relatively low
— from thirty to fifty — and could still be managed. Things began to change in the years of the crisis when the number of recipients increased. In 2015–16, the soup kitchen delivered approximately 300 daily meals. The demanding expansion of the service eventually changed the original spirit of sharing, leading to the sharp polarization between the place of the volunteers (the kitchen, where the meals are pre- pared) and the place of the recipients (the dining hall, where meals are consumed) with very few contacts between the two. As the old Caritas director regretted, from a pedagogical experiment, the soup kitchen became an unpleasant duty for the parishes; a mere matter of "organization of labor." Parish volunteers started to find it increasingly difficult to fulfill their tasks. The expenses for a 3-day service were around 500 euros (from 250 to 300 meals), and the church volunteers had to collect the sum on their own (or use the meager budget they received from the diocesan Caritas), while each shift required at least six volunteers per day, from Friday to Sunday.

Volunteers often expressed their disappointment with the management of the soup kitchen through unsympathetic and racist comments on the "arrogant" behavior and ingratitude of migrants, who "do not understand that this is not a restaurant" or tend to "waste food." Volunteers' comments replicated general common sense ideas about Caritas taking care of "the migrants" instead of relieving the suffering of the local poor, resonating with a nationwide myth about migrants and refugees receiving privileged treatment while "Italians are starving." It does not come as a surprise that Matteo Salvini — the new (Northern) League party leader[10] — started campaigning in those years with the motto "Italians first" (Ambrosini 2019).

In the soup kitchen, the difference between local recipients and "foreigners" (*stranieri*) was reflected in the different spatial patterns of meal collection and consumption and the relationships with volunteers that these patterns entailed. Migrants and asylum seekers were the recipients who had their meals in the soup kitchen, while local recipients — for whom most of the meals were prepared — collected the meal from the Caritas' backdoor to have it at home. The division between "internal" (*interni*) and "external" (*esterni*) meals corresponded quite clearly to the different patterns of presence and visibility in the soup kitchen.

The opposition between "our poor" (the deserving) and "the immigrant" (the undeserving) occurred whenever the parish volunteers raised the issue of resources and duties. This was particularly frequent in the case of Caritas groups in poor neighborhoods of the city, who saw themselves forced to choose whether to feed "their poor" in the neighborhood or "the immigrants" in the soup kitchen. Such dilemmas around allocating scarce resources were often framed through household management patterns. At the same time, volunteers mobilized notions of thrift and cautious saving to describe their management practices. For instance, the decision of the volunteers from a peripheral parish — among the poorest in the city

10 Salvini was elected federal secretary at the end of 2013.

— to pre- pare a one-course meal instead of the usual two courses,[11] was rebuked by the main supervisor while igniting discussions about the correct management and planning of resources. The decision was taken because volunteers lacked the financial resources to put up a complete meal. At the same time, some volunteers were openly unwilling to devote their work and resources to the soup kitchen, which entailed a reduction of material and financial support to the low-income families of their neighborhood. For the Caritas supervisor, this represented a serious problem since the meal supplied by the soup kitchen was the main if not the only meal of the day for many recipients. Volunteers from other parishes illustrated their strategies to find the best match between limited resources and the demand of securing a two-course meal. Someone explained that she shopped for the soup kitchen as though she was shopping for her household. Common strategies consisted of planning purchases according to super- market offers to maximize savings. This often entailed the hoarding of pasta (the usual first course), potatoes, or vegetables that could be frozen (e.g., eggplants).

The problems raised around the allocation of resources and the availability of time were framed through different ways of conceiving care work according to spheres of proximity. The spheres of proximity allow us to frame the question of "caring for whom" through the private/public distinction between domestic work and voluntary charity work, one which is informed by personal affect (e.g., motherly love) and the other by the de-personalized religious motifs of love (*caritas*). The spheres of proximity spread from the core perception of "natural" and spontaneous love *to* the non-binding, semi-bureaucratized charity commitment. The bureaucratization of charity brought about by the growing presence of Caritas in the field of social assistance, autonomous or in coordination with state agencies (e.g., food distribution), contributed to increasing pressure over voluntary work and the realization of how public authorities (e.g., municipal social service) tended to delegate to charities for their lean procedures in providing support. The spheres of proximity articulated the powerful (and exclusive) metaphors of the family and the nation (and, implicitly, even "race") in ways that resonate with broader discourses around undeserving migrants and refugees in reproducing the hierarchies of social assistance and the logics of exclusion from welfare entitlement (Tošić and Streinzer 2022). By doing so, the ideologies of social reproduction that regulate patterns of care across spheres of proximity enhance the tacit common sense informing the organizational principles of exclusionary welfare policies.

Conclusion: the common sense of social reproduction

In this article, we examined how ideologies of care and social reproduction inform and mediate religious-based social assistance in the austerity conjuncture, enhancing and reconfiguring exclusionary patterns of welfare distribution. We began by addressing how austerity policies have reconfigured welfare provisioning and modalities of social protection in Portugal and Italy. Due to historical factors and policy shifts in social protection frameworks, shaped by the increasing state delegation of welfare responsibilities to the third sector, catholic charities have

11 The parish set a limited number of meals (230), with only one course, a side dish, and a loaf of bread. A full meal usually included a first course (mostly pasta), a second course (vegetables, potatoes, or meat), one little loaf of bread, and (not frequently) fruit or cake.

regained prominence in the field of social assistance. Our comparative ethnographies of food charity distribution elicit how volunteers' practices, meanings, and perceptions are shaped and informed by specific ideologies of care and social reproduction and their consequences in sustaining broader hierarchies of worth and modalities of welfare exclusion according to spheres of proximity.

The case study of Setúbal stresses how normative models of social reproduction and livelihood improvement, embedded in historical configurations of kin, class, and generation, inform volunteers' ethics and practices of care which are at odds with the objective livelihood conditions of those seeking to escape poverty. Volunteers' deployment of moralities of deservingness reinforces a stratification of valued and devalued needs, claims, and entitlements among the poor population. A hierarchy of worth is produced through the volunteers' common sense of the proper ways of engaging with the world of work, domestic arrangements, gendered provision- ing responsibilities, and sustaining the livelihood aspirations of younger generations. Volunteers' ethics and care practices are not bound to the "Christian love for your neighbor." Instead, they are a product of historically and socially sanctioned practices, ideas, and representations of what constitutes the proper or "respectable" mode of evading poverty and conducting one's life (Skeggs 1997). The ethnography unravels the often neglected, contingent, and embedded character of the ethics of care and its limits and contested role in enabling rights recuperation or capacity- building within the austerity conjuncture.

The articulation of difference across spheres of proximity emerged in the analysis of charity-based social assistance in Brindisi. Like in Setúbal, the organization of charity assistance relied on normative ideas of social reproduction while find- ing expression in exclusionary and scapegoating idioms of populist discourses. The common sense underpinning organizational practices coexisted in contradictory ways with ordinary charity discourses of solidarity and assistance to *the needy*. Such contradictions revealed how the precarization of livelihoods and the territorial rescaling of welfare responsibilities elicited the volunteers' ambivalent reactions towards the perception and understanding of social injustice and structural inequalities. Though driven by generic notions of "loving" and attending to the poor, volunteers' practices and discourses mobilize notions of resource scarcity, demarcating spheres of entitlement, and adopting the idioms of the family and the nation in an exclusionary manner. The intersection of gendered care work and voluntary work, while responding to the neoliberal call for the unselfish ethics of the welfare community, reproduces relations of subordination and the "obvious and simple" determination of deservingness.

We argue that the everyday practices and encounters of charity volunteerism provide helpful insight into the articulation of family ideologies and ethics of care with the reshaping of welfare organization and entitlement in the context of austerity. However, far from assuming this articulation as a coherent and linear process, we highlight the spaces of contradiction that result from the organizational practices and the ideologies of care and social reproduction. Our analysis of organizational practices in charity settings shows a relational continuum (of practices and ideologies) between the broad gendered domestic sphere and voluntary work. The mate- rial contradictions that mark this relational continuum shape the moral and practical regulatory principles of welfare distribution through the reproduction of normative subordination, hierarchy, and exclusion patterns.

The analysis of food charity organizational encounters through the notion of ideologies of care and social reproduction relies upon the joint combination of critical feminist perspectives and Gramsci's notion of common sense. Doing so enabled us to retain the crucial feminist processual critique of gendered ideologies of naturalization as a prominent factor in the re-arrangement and contextual deployment of the fragmentary ideas, conceptions, and practices constituting the common sense of social reproduction. Critical feminist perspectives disclose the naturalization of the most "obvious and simple" — the "right and natural," thus allowing us to piece together the multiscalar connections between the intimate worldliness of common sense, the contradictory reproduction of social relations, and the broader historical forces at work in the making and remaking of inequalities.

Intending to contribute to the anthropological literature on welfare transformations, care, and citizenship under neoliberal austerity, we stress how ideologies of care and social reproduction produce contradictions which accentuate the exclusionary properties of care in the austerity politics of welfare. Further, we emphasize how ideologies of care and social reproduction encompass domains (including those of family values, the gendered domestic sphere, the durational bounds of kinship obligations, responsibilities, and national belonging) that, under austerity, have been fundamental to ensuring broader welfare transformations and reconfigurations towards increasingly unequal redistributive patterns. The common sense of social reproduction refers to the ideological sanctioned forms of conducting one's life and sustaining worthy lives across generations within concrete material historical constraints and possibilities. Its naturalized and taken-for-granted qualities make it a truly "material force" that is always the passive product and — simultaneously
— the active producer of broader dynamics of progressive or regressive transformations (Gramsci 1975; Hall 1988). The mobilization, justification, and enactment of ideologies of care and social reproduction in the field of religious charity-based social assistance in Italy and Portugal show the forms through which the common sense of social reproduction ultimately becomes instrumental in the regressive naturalization of poverty at the core of the exclusionary and discriminatory patterns of welfare distribution.

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