

An unprecedented experiment in political economy and participatory democracy: The Teatro Valle experience and its legacies

By Massimiliano Mollona¹

This report assesses the ‘Teatro Valle experience’ – from the occupation of the Teatro Valle theatre in Rome in 2011 until its peaceful dis-occupation in the summer of 2014. It argues that the occupation of the theatre left at least three legacies: (1) a legal notion of the commons that is replicable across the political spectrum; (2) a new model of political economy for cities; (3) a new form of prefigurative politics that inverts the logic of traditional politics. The report also describes the negotiation currently taking place between the former occupants and the municipality on a model of co-management for the theatre (Teatro Partecipato Project) and argues that this model could be a blueprint for a wider process of grassroots urban democratisation and economic redistribution in Europe.

In June 2011, a group of artists, activists and cultural workers occupied the Teatro Valle, a theatre built in 1727 by the art patron Marquise Camillo Capranica inside his spectacular Renaissance palace in the historic centre of Rome. The occupation was meant to prevent the municipality from privatising the theatre – one of first in Europe to be open to the general public in 1822.

In August 2014, the occupants left the Valle peacefully following a relocation order by the municipality. Over the course of these three years the Valle became a legally recognised *commons* (*Fondazione Teatro Valle Beni Comune*)² experimenting with collective and grassroots forms of cultural production, urban governance and civic activism and sparking a new wave of *commoning* across Italy and Europe. Below, I assess the circumstances surrounding the occupation of Valle, the legacy of the occupation and the negotiation that is currently taking place between the Teatro Valle Occupato community and the municipality.

The context of the occupation

Teatro Valle was occupied in 2011 on the day after the victory of the Italian water referendum when 27 million Italians voted against the privatisation of water utilities. At that time, a new left-wing coalition – including grassroots political and civil society organisations and a splinter group from Partito Democratico (the main left-wing party) – came together around the *Movement for Water Common Good* led by MP Stefano Rodotà, Ugo Mattei and other prominent lawyers.

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² Although recognised by national law, the Fondazione is not recognised by the prefecture in Rome.

The movement opposed the programme of privatisation and labour deregulation of the Berlusconi government and proposed a radical reorganisation of the state based on decentralised forms governance and progressive welfare policies, including a European basic income and minimum wage. In 2010, Berlusconi's Minister for the Economy Giulio Tremonti closed down the *Ente Teatrale Italiano* (ETI – the national agency in charge of the management of some public theatres and cultural institutions). This *de facto* sparked the privatisation of the whole Italian theatre sector.

In 2011, the *Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali* (the Ministry for Culture) transferred the management of the Teatro Valle to the municipality. Rumour had it that the theatre was to be turned into an exclusive restaurant. By occupying the theatre, artists and cultural producers were taking a stand against the commodification and privatisation of culture. They claimed that culture is a common good to be self-managed and controlled by its community. The occupants invited Rodotà, Mattei and other prominent lawyers to base their [Commissione Costituente Beni Comuni](#) (a constitutional reform project set up by Rodotà) inside the theatre. This became a grassroots laboratory for the legal theorisation of the notion of 'commons'. Two years into the occupation, the Valle became *Fondazione Teatro Valle Bene Comune*, the first foundation for common good in Italy and the first illegal occupation to be legalised through the tools of constitutional law.³

Legacies

Retrospectively, at least three legacies have emerged from the experience of Valle.

(1) Horizontal replicability of commons

The first success of Valle was the legal recognition of the theatre as a form of common good (from now on referred to as 'commons'), achieved through the re-contextualisation of the national debate on water and natural resources in the cultural field. The legalisation of the struggle allowed for horizontal *replicability*, for instance, across ecological movements, cultural organisations and different strata of the cultural *precariat*, including technicians, actors and civil servants. This facilitated a series of legalised occupations across Italy. The creation of the *Fondazione* led to a self-perception of the movement as being constituent and borderless rather than oppositional and marginal. On a broader level, the idea of borderless and self-sufficient communities of artists and cultural workers seemed to challenge the self-contained austerity policies

³ For an assessment on the legal aspects of the Valle experience, see Bailey, Saki and Maria Edoarda Marcucci, 2013. Legalizing the Occupation The Teatro Valle as a Cultural Commons', in [The South Atlantic Quarterly](#). *Against the Day*. Spring 112: 2.

and xenophobic ideologies of the nation-state and lay the groundwork for a new federalist Europe.⁴

However, the legal notion of commons is in fact place-bound. In place-based struggles – normally associated with the South – the rights of people and the rights of the land and objects blend into each other. Political subjectivities emerge from everyday practices of livelihood and are inscribed in the very physical environment. This is the strength of such movements. But when places cease to exist (legally or physically) political subjects disappear with them. In fact, since the beginning of the occupation, it was clear that Teatro Valle itself *was* the subject of the movement. After the closure of the theatre the movement struggled to exist as a unitary political subject. In order to be sustainable, commons must exceed their legal boundaries and expand into wider and diversified networks of value production and activism.

(2) Political economy of the commons

The second achievement of Valle was to implement a form of collective welfare – a welfare of the commons. Against the invisible enclosures and abstractions of financial capitalism and the cultural branding of historical cities, the cultural workers of the *Fondazione* took control of the economy, making collective and consensual decisions about the daily running of the theatre including, programming, budgeting, funding issues and the conditions of membership and participation.

In her famous study of the commons,⁵ economist Elinor Ostrom argues that commons are neither all-inclusive (as supposedly, for public property) nor exclusive (as for private property). Instead, they are hybrids between collective and hierarchical social formations and between communal and private forms of value production. The economy of commons is sustainable as long as it combines different economic rationalities and contains nested levels of authority and decision-making, which allow for coordination between different communities and forms of value production.

Yet, perhaps because of the strong juridical framing of the struggle, which bonded it to the material spaces of the theatre and its sector, there has been little coordination between Valle and other forms of urban *commoning*. For instance, Valle took on board some public functions of the disbanded ETI (public outreach, international networks and multi-disciplinarity) and became a welfare provider (accommodation, childcare, education) for the occupants and the local community. But how can this public wealth be accounted for, so that it does not end up being just outsourced labour for a privatised state? And how do experiences of auto-production and cultural *commoning* square with

⁴ Baravalle, Marco, 2010. [The Diagonal of Commonfare](#). Former West. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia.

⁵ Ostrom, Elinor, 1991. *Governing the Commons The Evolution for Institutions for Collective Actions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. See more [here](#).

the broader issue of the artist's rights to economic remuneration?⁶ What kind of alliances can be drawn between precarious artists and precarious industrial and public workers in the context of increased labour deregulation across the social spectrum? The proposed collaboration between Valle and the municipality could be a chance for the *Fondazione* to embed its practices of participatory democracy and co-governance in the broader political economy of the city.

(3) *Prefigurative politics*

The third legacy of Valle and of similar artist-occupied spaces is to have expanded the boundaries of the political. Inverting the logic of traditional politics, in which theories inform actions, these artist-led movements have a practice-driven, performative and open-ended political praxis based on experimentation, ex-post conceptualisation and a constant engagement on two fronts. One of struggle and critique of the hegemonic forces of capitalism; another of epistemological and discursive construction of a new post-capitalist imaginary, including new forms of dramaturgy in which art and politics inform each other. Besides, the economy of care – both of people and places – is central to the commons.⁷ In Valle this is evident in the fundamental role that women, young people, migrants and precarious workers played in decision-making and the daily running of the theatre. As well as being renowned for its activism, Valle established itself as one of the most successful art centres in Europe, developing a new form of art commissioning that shies away from the traditional format of the exhibition, and is based on grassroots collaborations in urgent sites and moments of struggle.

Present and future of Valle

The occupants' decision to leave the theatre peacefully was consensually agreed in a long general assembly, but it was nonetheless deeply divisive for the movement. The decision was taken based on the proposal made by Teatri di Roma (the managing body of the municipality) to co-manage Teatro Valle with a *Fondazione* starting in 2015. On the day of the dis-occupation, Marino Sinibaldi, the left-wing president of Teatri di Roma, committed himself in public to an experimental model of *Teatro Partecipato* ('co-managed theatre'). That is, the municipality will manage the theatre for six months based on its traditional forms of *public* programming and management, and in the other half of the year the *Fondazione* will implement its own model of cultural production and governance.

⁶ The SIAE, the Italian copyright collecting agency, used the issue of artists' remuneration to discredit the experience of Valle and stir a national polemic.

⁷ See also Federici, Silvia, 2011. "[Feminism and the Politics of the Commons](#)" in *The Commoner*.

However, negotiations about the *convenzione* (agreement) with Teatri di Roma is proving difficult. The municipality rejected the occupants' demand to continue to use the Foyer for their meetings and public events after the relocation because it had to settle its debt on arrears on rents with the current owner of the Foyer – Marchese Capranica del Grillo. In addition, the theatre badly needed to be refurbished before the start of the new season. But as yet, this work has not begun.

In the meantime, due to an imminent radical reorganisation of the national theatre system, which will reduce the number of national theatres in Italy by a third, the former occupants and Teatri di Roma are rushing to make a joint application – which will incorporate the *convenzione* – to the Ministry for Culture in order for Valle to gain the status of a national theatre.

Many former occupants oppose the negotiation and see the proposal of co-management as a straightforward form of co-optation of the commons by the state. But they also see this hybridisation between two structures of governance and productive models as a moment of growth and self-transformation – a new instituting process rather than a process of institutionalisation. In fact, Teatro di Roma will incorporate into its own structure the communal model of governance of the Fondazione (and its 5,600 members), which will continue to be self-determined in terms of governance and budget. According to the negotiating group, the proposed new organisational form of the commons will also be reproducible in other institutional contexts and spread across the political spectrum. Acknowledging the potential conflict between the private logic of the *convenzione* and the principles of sovereignty of the assembly, in January the former occupants held an open meeting to discuss the technical and political details of the agreement, including organisational functions and roles, costs, accessibility, public impact, price of the tickets and programming. The fact that they opened up to the public the discussion that was taking place *in private* between the former occupants and the municipality is in itself a strong political statement. The Teatro Valle is a public place for citizens to meet and engage in a collective conversation.

The occupation of Valle took place when grassroots movements and the traditional left joined forces against the incompetent, arrogant and corrupt Berlusconi government. Today the 'new left' has partly converged into Renzi's administration – which continues to support privatisation, labour deregulation and austerity. Popular forces have been co-opted by Grillo's populist *Movimento Cinque Stelle* ('five star movement') – which initially supported Rodotà. In this context, it is difficult for utopian projects such as Valle to exist. However, culture will continue to play a central role in the Italian economy and the struggle over the cultural commons can only but intensify. The *Teatro Partecipato Project* could be an unprecedented experiment in political economy and participatory democracy that is replicable in cities across Europe – if Teatri di Roma keeps its promises.

