

Claudia Amodio
Amalia Diurni *Editors*

Human Vulnerability in Interaction with AI in European Private Law

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Preface

This volume collects the outcomes of the research activities carried out with the support of the Italian Ministry of University and Research, under the PRIN Project 2020XBFME2, “Digital Vulnerability in European Private Law” (DiVE), and of the Istituto Italiano di Studi Germanici, under the project “Instabilità del diritto e vulnerabilità digitale”. Both projects aimed to investigate how the notion of digital vulnerability can be framed in relation to private law, human subjectivity, and governance mechanisms.

The first international conference, held in Ferrara in 2023, was devoted to the analysis of digital vulnerability in domestic and European private law, with a particular focus on consumer protection and the functioning of the marketplace. The second conference, organized at Villa Mondragone, University of Rome “Tor Vergata”, in May 2024, broadened the scope of inquiry under the title “Human Vulnerability in Interaction with AI”. The theme was articulated around an interdisciplinary approach, combining contributions from law, philosophy, sociology, computer science, and related fields. In addition, a specific call for papers was launched for PhD candidates and early-career researchers, whose presentations were included in the program and subsequently developed into contributions to this volume. Their participation has ensured the presence of innovative perspectives and reflects the intergenerational character of the debate.

The volume is organized into two main parts.

The first part, “Human–Machine Interaction Between Digital Humanism and Digital Citizenship”, examines the ways in which digital technologies challenge human dignity, agency, and participation in the civic sphere. Contributions here address, among other issues, the redefinition of subjectivity in technologically mediated contexts, electoral manipulation and disinformation, automated contracting and its risks to autonomy, and the vulnerabilities created by AI in intimate, emotional, and health-related settings. Other chapters turn to questions of digital inclusion, the persistence of divides in connectivity, and the reconfiguration of civic duty in the age of artificial intelligence. Taken together, these analyses situate HMI within the broader discourse of digital humanism, asking how technologies can support—rather than erode—citizenship and participation.

The second part, “Human–Machine Interaction and Policy Strategies Between Anticipatory Governance and Sustainability of Risks”, turns to regulatory, institutional, and policy challenges. Contributions in this section address the risks and opportunities of AI governance, from sector-specific regulation (such as healthcare, insurance, and digital markets) to broader issues of liability, intellectual property, and data protection. By engaging with anticipatory governance and sustainability frameworks, these chapters underline the urgency of designing policies capable of coping with uncertainty and preventing systemic harms, while at the same time fostering innovation.

By juxtaposing these two perspectives—one centered on human dignity and citizenship, the other on regulation and risk governance—the volume provides a comprehensive account of the challenges and opportunities of human–machine interaction. At the same time, it reflects our firm belief that the development of legal frameworks suited to the digital age requires an unprecedented, coordinated, and collective effort by a scholarly community spanning not only disciplines, but also generations.

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Beyond Liminality: Digital Technologies between Inclusion and Citizenship



Michele Sorice and Andrea Volterrani

Abstract This chapter explores the intricate relationship between digital technologies, citizenship and inclusion in liminal spaces—transitional areas marked by marginalisation, vulnerability and continuous change. The study is focused on how liminal communities navigate the balance between exclusion and empowerment through digital participation. The study conceptualises liminal spaces as sites of refiguration resulting from processes of poly-contextualisation, deep mediatisation and translocationalisation. Often situated in the urban peripheries, these communities experience segregated social capital and systemic marginalisation yet simultaneously develop innovative forms of resistance and democratic participation. The research reveals how ‘paternalistic neoliberalism’ appropriates participatory rhetoric while maintaining exclusionary practices. Through an empirical analysis of five liminal communities in Sicily, Calabria and Apulia, the authors demonstrate how digital technologies can be used for inclusion and self-empowerment. These communities develop hybrid participatory processes that combine online and offline engagement to create counter-narratives to dominant neoliberal discourse. The study identifies key factors that enable transformation, including community mobilisation, supportive local governance, openness in the third sector, and communicative ecosystems. The analysis sheds light on how active citizenship can emerge in marginal spaces, challenging traditional notions of national citizenship through participatory practices. While acknowledging digital inequalities and AI-related concerns, the research highlights the potential for technology-mediated democratic innovation in vulnerable communities. It suggests pathways towards more inclusive forms of citizenship that transcend territorial and institutional boundaries.

Keywords Citizenship • Communities • Digital technologies • Inclusion • Liminality

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1 Two Basic Concepts: Liminality and Space

Liminality and space are strongly interconnected because, when we speak about liminality, we refer to a specific liminal space. Notably, “liminal spaces” are defined as spaces that are characterised by both (1) processes of refiguration¹ due to poly-contextualisation, deep mediatisation² and translocalisation³ and (2) processes of marginalisation, vulnerabilisation,⁴ gentrification⁵ and defamiliarisation.⁶ A “liminal space” lies “on the border of two dominant spaces, not fully part of either”.⁷ Thus, these spaces cannot be easily defined in terms of use and are not clearly ‘owned’ by a particular party. This directly contrasts with dominant spaces which are defined by main uses, have clear boundaries and contain practices that are intertwined with social expectations, routines, and norms. In liminal spaces, which are in transition, individual and collective identities remain fluid or anchored to the even sometimes deviant specificities of the territories; they belong to spaces such that they become familiar and are taken for granted in the landscape of everyday life⁸ We assume that when liminal spaces are inhabited by communities and considered vital and meaningful in their everyday lives, they cease to be ambiguous spaces and become transitional dwelling places that give meaning to the activities, languages and instances that develop there.⁹ Liminal communities are refigured spaces undergoing profound transformations due to both endogenous and exogenous phenomena; the first major change involves figuration. To analyse the process of the construction of social reality, Elias¹⁰ introduced the term ‘figuration’ as a conceptual tool for understanding the complex problems of interdependence that the coexistence of many humans generates and how these problems are solved. Elias argues that social change is always partly a change at the figuration level. According to Elias, understanding the enduring social formations of human beings as figurations constituted by the interdependencies and interactions of the individuals involved is fundamental. They can be characterised by a certain “balance of power”,¹¹ i.e., by power relations constituted by the interdependencies themselves. The boundaries of each figuration are defined by the shared meaning that is produced by the individuals involved through interrelated social practices, which form the basis of their mutual orientation. Liminal communities are understood as figurations of figurations (as several figurations coexist within them) in transition. In addition to traditional figurations such as families, formal

¹ Knoblach and Löw (2017, pp. 1–27).

² Hepp (2020).

³ Hepp (2015).

⁴ Castel (2014), Brown et al. (2017, pp. 497–500).

⁵ Sennett (2018).

⁶ Blokland (2017), Blokland et al. (2022, pp. 258–268).

⁷ Dale and Burrell (2008).

⁸ Blokland (2017, pp. 54–60).

⁹ Casey (1993).

¹⁰ Elias (1987).

¹¹ Elias (1987, p. 131).

and informal interest groups, social conformations that exist in complete illegality (e.g., organised crime) or on the borders of legality (e.g., precarious undeclared and piecework work), social actors in civil society with organisational and management peculiarities, precarious small-scale crafts and entrepreneurial paths and formations constitute liminal communities. Regardless of the value connotations we assign to the figures, they all face external pressures for change and multiple internal pressures to find a new balance in the social practices of everyday life.

The second aspect that characterises the process of the refiguration of liminal communities, poly-contextualisation, specifically refers to the multiplication of contexts and frames to which people react simultaneously, sometimes creating overlaps, conflicts, or even mutual indifference. The presence of very different cultures and subcultures within the same social space is one of the most important concepts of co-contextualisation, as it has been fuelled in the last 30 years in Western countries by numerically significant migration processes.¹²

Another relevant aspect of liminal communities is social capital. Many of these communities have very intense social relations but are more segregated than other communities, even spatially contiguous communities, are. Thus, instead of focusing on bonding or bridging social capital,¹³ we should address segregated and privatised social capital.¹⁴ In some cases, this type of social capital becomes a resource for liminal communities. Moreover, the digital ecosystem plays an important role at this level.

The second concept is spatiality, particularly in its specific meaning as referring to urban space.

Spatiality has become central to people's social and media practices,¹⁵ transforming the way communities are formed towards greater flexibility and widespread molecularisation on the one hand and towards unprecedented forms of social innovation and resistance on the other, at least in some respects. For example, some microcommunity experiences also seem to have gained the characteristics of the workers' mutualities of the late 19th century, but with a focus on ties with the territory rather than on those born within the work context or a combination of both aspects. This was the case for the collective linked to the experience of the GKN of Campi Bisenzio near Florence, which originated from work experience and has turned into a sort of modern Workers' Mutual Aid Society, capable of also moving into the sphere of training and cultural promotion in the territory.

The concept of urban space has often been related to that of community, which constitutes a controversial theoretical dimension in both participation studies and *urban studies*. Although urban space is, in fact, a central notion, it remains vague and, above all, difficult to operationalise in empirical terms. Since the beginning of the 21st century, many studies have attempted to move away from the idea of community as a stable structure that is continuous over time and has clearly defined internal

¹² Ambrosini et al. (2020).

¹³ Putnam (2001, pp. 41–51).

¹⁴ Blokland and Rae (2008, pp. 23–39).

¹⁵ Couldry (2004, pp. 115–132), Couldry and Hepp (2017), Couldry (2022).

relations. Instead, new strands of research have focused on an idea of community as an evolving structure, with relationships that do not necessarily last over time; however, the most important aspect is precisely the relationship with space (mostly declining as inhabited territory). In other words, the spatial dimension has become more prevalent than the temporal dimension. This transformation of perspective has facilitated the consideration of territorial communities starting from social practices and, in particular, urban practices in spaces of sharing, even in liminal (not necessarily marginal) spaces that are inhabited by more or less vulnerable subjects. At this level, hybrid social bodies in which the participatory dimension constitutes one of the qualifying elements of the social relationship can be studied.

Urban communities are realities connected to a territory, albeit often in a non-ascriptive way, in which relations are made possible precisely by political action. Unsurprisingly, political participation in community is the central element of the very theoretical definition of community.¹⁶

As aforementioned, over the last few years, many territorial realities—mostly urban—have adopted some of the early twentieth-century modalities of mutual aid societies, reversing them in a network logic with a marked political propensity. This has led to experiences that greatly differ from each other but share the need to recreate a participatory fabric capable of going beyond the exhausted forms of political organisation in common. Thus, in communicative practices (including those inherent to the adoption of digital tools), a space for facilitating inclusion, when it is not also a ground for confrontation and 'resistance', has been found for new organisational forms.

There are many 'community' experiences, often with a specific vocation for urban regeneration. The following fall into this family of experiences: (a) street associations, which are territorial communities born in the function of 'defending' a mostly circumscribed space (the neighbourhood or similar space) and in some cases connected more or less consciously to experiences of urban regeneration and/or 'shared administration'; (b) technological reappropriation groups, which are communities sharing access to the internet through open Wi-Fi connections (very fashionable in the USA but less present in Italy, where however, experiences of 'media activism' connected to struggles for access to broadcasting communication have developed in the past); (c) 'rebellion by doing' experiences, which are movement realities that have a strong sensitivity in the tactical reuse of spaces (e.g., the creation of a political sensibility through the transmission of knowledge, from home baking to the creation of shared vegetable gardens); (d) horizontal solidarity groups, including everything from solidarity purchasing groups (often in connection with proximity democracy practices) to those engaged in *cohousing* projects; and e) urban communities in the strictest sense, which are often activated by the most disparate motivations and, in many cases, also within liminal spaces and/or widespread marginality. These various experiences and organisational forms share what has often been called *creative participation*.¹⁷

¹⁶ Blokland (2017).

¹⁷ Micheletti et al. (2021).

The modality of social ties is a relevant aspect in the study of the spaces of urban practices of political participation. If the frame is, in fact, represented by the spatial dimension, traditional criteria that refer to the mere logic of network connection (friendship, family, etc.) are not sufficient to define the social ties activated within the perimeter of communities of political participation. From this perspective, Talja Blokland's (2017) proposal to study ties in terms of the modalities of social practices and orientation toward action is very convincing. Blokland's proposal refers to a kind of typology of social ties based on four variables: (a) transactions; (b) attachment; (c) interdependencies; and (d) constraints.

Communities of participatory practices are both 'diasporic'¹⁸ (in Stuart Hall's sense, i.e., as the outcome of a conscious process and not merely the result of uprooting) and relational. These communities can also be located in liminal spaces or be the result of an action of resistance and/or resilience in such spaces. Indeed, the connection between precariousness and resilience is one of the central aspects of aggregation in border and crossing (liminal) spaces. Certainly, the notion of tactical adaptation can be applied to participatory practices in liminal spaces: in such spaces, in fact, subjects (aggregated and nonaggregated) tactically adopt participatory practices, continually redefining their relationship with the physical space.

Finally, we highlight the complex relationship between urban regeneration (especially in liminal spaces) and the emergence of so-called 'good-natured neoliberalism'¹⁹. Indeed, in many cases, liminal spaces are traversed by *planning* procedures, surrounded by a deep-rooted storytelling that makes them a sociopolitical construct,²⁰ mostly functional to the various forms of public-private partnerships. In the 'narrative' modes of good-natured neo-liberalism (which by its very nature is strongly depoliticised), planning is often narrated as the 'promotion of innovation', sometimes with references to a generic notion of inclusion, significantly placed within the framework of 'sustainable urban economic development'. In this context, expressions such as 'collaborative governance' or 'urban regeneration' are affirmed (and resemanticised), often assumed in a volatile and arbitrary manner, capable of activating forms that are only partially participatory but substantially functional to the legitimization of economic stakeholders and not necessarily to the inclusion of vulnerable subjects.

The adoption of the concept of 'governmentality' and its numerous reinterpretations, which also occur in urban regeneration practices and often in connection with the notion of 'governability',²¹ is also part of this framework. It represents an important stage in both the affirmation of the new neo-liberal global rationality and in

¹⁸ According to Stuart Hall, the diasporic intellectual maintains a critical link with their community of origin while also moving within their community of destination. They are both inside and outside of each community, not only as a result of displacement, but also by choice. In this sense, diasporic communities consciously experience their 'internal/external' relationship with space. Hall (1990).

¹⁹ Dardot and Laval (2014), Hall and O'Shea (2015, pp. 8–24).

²⁰ Pizzo (2015, p. 185).

²¹ Moreover, by generating a de facto hierarchy between governability and representation (in favour of the former), this tendency undermines the liberal idea of democracy itself.

the transformation of capitalism into an 'institutionalised social order', to use Nancy Fraser's (2020) effective expression²²

These tendencies are part of the broader flow of 'naturalisation' of neoliberal capitalism, which can often include even the dimensions of protest and resistance within its dominant narrative. Thus, the logics of "appropriation" of social struggles²³ are found both in advertising campaigns²⁴ and in the "storytelling" that sometimes accompanies the growth (which is in itself desirable) of experiences of democratic innovation, not coincidentally often transformed into bureaucratised procedures in which vulnerable subjects are relegated to legitimising with their presence choices that have already been made²⁵ Not coincidentally, the most refined tendencies of 'cool capitalism'²⁶ find possibilities for legitimisation and affirmation precisely in the appropriation 'from above' of marginal and/or liminal spaces.

2 Towards an Inclusive Idea of Citizenship

Citizenship is substantiated by membership, which can be either ascriptive or affiliative but in any case effectively excludes those who do not belong to it by rights (Marshall had written exemplary pages on this aspect as far back as 1950); and by participatory processes as well as a true culture of participation, albeit with all the caution concerning participatory processes.

On the subject of the exclusions of citizenship, Étienne Balibar²⁷ has given an insightful analysis of the phenomenon. For this French scholar, citizenship constitutes a sort of compromise between the ruling and subordinate classes in the development of the modern twentieth-century state. However, this compromise has been challenged—and violently violated—by neo-liberalism, which is also among the causes (although not the only cause) of the global processes of de-democratisation. On the other hand, Balibar notes that forms of exclusion of citizenship have traversed much of human history: suffice it to think of ancient Greece where the distribution of government and administrative functions took place among subjects who had deliberative power since they were holders of a 'right of citizenship'. Thus, there was a coincidence between civil society and the State, which was only possible because some subjects were excluded and others were limited. In times closer to our own—in the age of the Enlightenment revolutions and then the industrial revolutions—citizenship is in fact superimposed on national belonging: it is the state that defines the rift between those who possess the powers to represent the will of the people and the 'mass' who are by definition incompetent.

²² Fraser (2022).

²³ Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), McGuigan (2016).

²⁴ Prodnik (2023, pp. 51–73).

²⁵ Sorice (2021)

²⁶ McGuigan (2009).

²⁷ Balibar (2015).

Although the idea that there is no citizenship without democracy seems to unite many (even temporally) distant authors, the national horizon is a more critical aspect. For Balibar, for example, neo-liberalism is the breaking of the link between citizenship and democracy, an aspect that was not present in 20th century theories. If democracy is the outcome of a (very unstable) balance between the conservative dimension of institutions and the thrusts towards reconfiguring citizenship, then it is clear that it is precisely the conflictuality that questions the national dimension that is the driving force behind the new citizenships. In addition, regulated deliberation between the parties cannot suffice, which—by its very nature—tends to exclude everything that escapes the ordering logic of the nation state. The result is that the tightening of the 'territorial' dimension of citizenship can only prevent the emergence of new citizenships. In addition, it is precisely this narrowing of possibilities (or the hypostatisation of already established ones) that provokes new exclusions (from class exclusions—which have changed their name but remain—to those linked to xenophobic and racist phenomena). However, the need for a citizenship based on substantive freedom and effective equality remains an ideal project, nevertheless present in the claims and demands of contemporary social movements but also among vulnerable subjects in situations of liminality.

One of the responses to the "incorporation" of democratic innovation procedures within the framework of neoliberalism is the diverse (and thus difficult to catalogue) forms of active citizenship. In many cases, indeed, civic engagement (or civism), regardless of whether it is accompanied by digital technologies, has been a response to both a need for participation and a need to increase the quality of democracy through the implementation of *policies* consistent with citizens' demands for a higher quality of life. The demand for quality in civic processes does not necessarily imply a demand for efficiency as is often theorised only as a 'reduction of time' to implement measures. Democracy, as is well known, does not need imperfect competition that generates monopolies, nor does it need paroxysmally restricted decision-making times that cause a kind of paradox: the absolute ideal of efficiency (zero difference between the moment of planning and the moment of realisation of public policies) is theoretically realised only in dictatorial regimes with strong personalistic overtones. This may also be realised—in different and 'good-natured' forms (but no less dangerous for democracy)—in regimes with a strong efficiencyist and technocratic character, typical of the processes of social neo-liberalisation. On the other hand, an 'efficiencyist' and 'meritocratic' vision of the state does not guarantee the achievement of an acceptable standard of quality but often leads to the dissolution of democracy itself. On the other hand, the quality or *responsiveness* of democracy must grow. The various structural crises that have affected (and are affecting) advanced capitalism have paradoxically represented unprecedented opportunities for social movements, associations, groups and ordinary citizens to become aware of the democratic deficit that was (is) affecting precisely liberal-representative democracies.

However, the crisis of confidence and disaffection towards politics should not be dismissed as a simple *exit* or, worse, withdrawal into the individual and personal sphere, since there are many forms of political participation that escape the old

definitions and adopt original creative modes. In liminal spaces, forms of organisation (and self-organisation) also fit into this scenario.

In the tension between potential *apathy* towards politics and the emergence of new forms of collective speech-making, however, different and apparently conflicting trends are developing; these range from the organisation of new forms of *contentious politics*²⁸ to the emergence of a logic of connective action thanks to digital technology and from participatory rhetoric to experiences of democratic involvement. Within this broad and not unambiguous framework, even the phenomena of abstention and the decline of trust should be redefined in a broader analysis of the transformation of the forms of democratic activity in which parties tend to lose their centrality. In other words, new forms of intermediation are emerging and seem to guarantee broader and more active participation, from pressure groups to *social forums*, from *advocacy* groups to voluntary associations and civil intervention, from social movements with general political aims to *grassroots movements*, sometimes linked to local and/or specific demands, and new urban movements. There is no lack, of course, of phenomena of anaesthetisation of political participation, caged within procedures that are as 'innovative' as they are devoid of real 'empowerment' for citizens.

The new political actors move in what Habermas called 'culturally mobilised public spheres', in which precisely the activation of new *intermediate bodies in movement* is possible. Within this framework, collective movements construct new collective identities. These new, more or less structured actors are those who adopt—in Rosanvallon's (2008) theorisation—*counterdemocratic practices*,²⁹ i.e., actions of vigilance, control and political denunciation. The aim of these activities, according to the French political historian, is not to achieve power but to influence and correct it, going beyond the dynamics of electoral competition (which is therefore no longer recognised as the only founding element of the democratic system). Thus, in this respect, alongside the flight into apathy, which is also present, the collective demand for new forms of social and political engagement is expanding. On the one hand, demands from the galaxy of social movements have developed; on the other hand, different and 'creative' forms of civic engagement, often labelled *active citizenship*, have asserted themselves.

Giovanni Moro very lucidly highlighted the emergence of new conceptualisations of citizenship that accompany the new 'citizenships' or at least their claims. Among these various conceptualisations, important aspects are those concerning the separation between citizenship and nationality, the centrality of participation, and the shift from the centrality of identities to the value of differences; moreover, the latter constitutes one of the objectives of xenophobic and racist neo-identitarian policies that, moreover, are perfectly in tune with the 'culture of waste' repeatedly denounced by Pope Francis. From these new conceptual perspectives, new claims for citizenship emerge; these range from urban citizenship to European citizenship (which is linked

²⁸ Tilly and Tarrow (2015).

²⁹ Rosanvallon (2008).

to a territory but not to a 'nation'), from global citizenship to digital citizenship, to gender citizenship and, of course, to active citizenship.³⁰

The latter is—in Moro's beautiful and effective definition—a practice that:

consists of a multiplicity of organisational forms and collective actions aimed at implementing rights, caring for common goods and/or supporting subjects in weakened conditions through the exercise of powers and responsibilities in policy making.³¹

Thus, active citizenship connects the nonprofit sphere, that of so-called civil society, and that of political commitment. Again, Giovanni Moro (2013) states that active citizenship does not involve political participation through political parties or through trade unions or associations operating in the world of economy and work; that is, all the so-called 'intermediate bodies' are excluded, which, while performing a representative action, do not constitute collective actions of active citizenship. Also excluded from the list of active citizenship experiences are the aggregations of civil society that carry out a relevant action of building social capital and yet are not, according to Moro, elements of active citizenship. Saying what is not active citizenship makes it possible to identify its actors. In reality, the universe of active citizenship is very broad and articulated. If political participation through parties is excluded, active citizenship includes reception centres, collective action movements, informal networks and even civic initiatives on the internet. The classification of active citizenship actors is very complex, not only because of the great variety of initiatives and organisational forms present on the ground but also because of the internet. It is certainly simpler to identify the *characteristics of active citizenship*, which Giovanni Moro classifies along six macrovariables: (a) the existence of a multiplicity of organisational forms; (b) the existence of a multiplicity of motivations on the part of 'active' citizens, from the sense of justice to the dimension of solidarity, from the desire for change to that of playing an active role in social processes, from the drive to work together to the desire to explore and experience one's own reality; (c) the existence of a multiplicity of fields of action, mostly transversal, from the environment to civil protection, from political commitment to welfare to education, from social battles for public services to consumerist ones, etc.; (d) the desire for commitment to public policy, which is considered a priority over commitment to parties and/or 'traditional politics'; (e) the development of a strong spirit of concreteness; and f) an approach to participation that is not purely symbolic but, on the contrary, a participatory spirit aimed at achieving concrete results. Some of the characteristics of active citizenship are both elements of strength (because they constitute a specific form of intervention and social relevance) and of potential weakness (the renunciation of politics in favour of 'policies' may represent, as with some forms of democratic innovation, a risk of confinement to marginal governance experiences).

Various tools and practices are adopted as part of active citizenship; Moro still calls them 'technologies' since these practices are based on tools (communicative, legal, public action) that constitute real technical-formal apparatuses.³²

³⁰ Moro (2013).

³¹ Moro (2013, p. 28).

³² Moro (2013).

These different 'technologies' are also closely connected with the different types of active citizenship, where in-effect information or advisory activities coexist with the management of services (think of listening and guidance organisations, proximity activities, forms of reception and assistance) or even experiences of civicism (the collection of signatures or education in the critical use of the media) with mechanisms for activating institutions (from support for citizens' legal action to complaints and consumerism practices). Even when analysing the different technologies of active citizenship, one can see the breadth of a phenomenon that is difficult to classify in overly rigid interpretative grids. However, the most important aspect of this phenomenon is its capacity to activate forms of citizen participation, often outside not only the spaces of political representation through parties but also the areas of intervention and engagement traditionally occupied by nonprofits. The space of active citizenship, in fact, is located in an interstitial zone that is within civil society but is essentially informal. Moreover, it is 'a phenomenon of self-organisation that may or may not meet with institutions, but which nevertheless has as its perspective that of looking after the general interest'.³³

The experiences of active citizenship can be placed within the framework of the third sector; at the same time, they do not completely overlap with this framework since both the active citizenship and the third sector entities contain very diverse and articulated experiences. Both in the logic of active citizenship and in that of the third sector, however, political participation constitutes both an end and a means of social and economic development, since it favours (or should favour) the increase in decision-making power of the most marginalised social groups and gives representation to the voices of these social groups. From such a perspective, the egalitarian and inclusive variables of participation are always strongly emphasised, and there is a strong sensibility aimed at recovering the 'common' dimension.³⁴ The perspective identified by a new 'reason for the common'³⁵ is almost naturally based on the development of the community as an agent of change. From this point of view, the space of participation occupied by active citizenship (and the mobilisation of the third sector) theoretically constitutes a counternarrative to neoliberal rationality. At the same time, they reverse the very logic of citizenship: it is such, in fact, only if it is inclusive and if it is capable of being founded on the idea and practices of participation. In other words, one does not participate simply because one is a citizen; in contrast, participation defines citizenship. Such an idea of citizenship—on the basis of the community dimension—cannot be inclusive.

³³ Moro (2013, p. 243).

³⁴ Harvey (2019).

³⁵ Dardot and Laval (2019).

3 Examples of Resistance

Here, we would like to mention some relevant cases of the use of digital technologies as tools for inclusion or, in other cases, as tools to support bottom-up action by vulnerable actors or as tools to connect forms of direct action.

We refer here to the case of the Belgian Citizens' Platform for Refugee Support, a genuine experience of self-representation in which the logic of 'direct representation' becomes an instrument of countervailing power.

Another case—unlike the first two—is the role of hyperlocal media, which is also increasingly central due to the significant decline in traditional journalistic models. It is precisely the possibilities offered by the internet and digital technologies that enable hyperlocal initiatives to strengthen civic engagement in territories and act as a site and resource for local deliberative processes. Many studies in this area have been conducted in the last 5–6 years in different parts of the world, especially in Northern Europe (but there are experiences spread in several areas of the world). In particular, hyperlocal media not only provide information but also contribute to community building and often act as instruments of civic mediation, sometimes even beyond their own expectations and even beyond their own projects.

In this chapter, to provide examples from empirically studied social practices, we have focused on the fifteen-year-long training course of FQTS (*Formazione Quadri Dirigenti del Terzo Settore nel Sud*),³⁶ which has enabled us to meet, train, analyse and accompany people with experiences in third sector organisations in the communities and territories of many regions in southern Italy.

Among these multiple experiences, we cite those that, owing to their peculiar characteristics and problematic nature, for the actions implemented and for the obstacles encountered, are, in our opinion, significant for the discussion of the approach we proposed in the first part of the chapter. The realities concerned are (a) the “Librino” district (in the municipality of Catania, Sicily), with a population of 15,000 inhabitants, in which the actions carried out were developed primarily in the direction of the implementation of a digital platform; (b) the “Margi” neighbourhood, in the municipality of Gela (again in Sicily), a liminal area contiguous to the now disused petrochemical pole; (c) the “Panebianco” neighbourhood, in the municipality of Cosenza (Calabria), where multiple communities coexist and in which the primary objective of the intervention was the involvement in the implementation of ecological transition objectives; (d) the “Fantasia” district, in the municipality of San Severo (in Apulia), a real “forgotten” liminal space, in which the territorial action was aimed at consolidating the links between public administration and third sector entities; and (e) the Pellaro district, in the municipality of Reggio Calabria, in which actions were developed for the implementation of hybrid processes (digital and “on site”) of participation and for the social development of the community. In this district, direct action was based on a theoretical approach that referred to urban and media practices and the mediated construction of social reality. The activation

³⁶ FQTS is a training programme promoted by Forum del Terzo Settore Nazionale and CSV Net Coordinamento dei Centri di Servizi al Volontariato funded by 'Fondazione Con il Sud'.

of the community development process focused on the intertwining of deep mediation and the everyday lives of people in the neighbourhood.³⁷ In particular, actions that enabled the growth of social and digital/social skills among the most vulnerable people were developed. From an edu-communication perspective,³⁸ these people were enabled to become protagonists in the process of territorial and digital relationship development, also owing to the use of participation and community platforms, both commercial and co-constructed by citizens, and made easily accessible even to those with less basic digital skills.

Periodic meetings with third sector organisations, public administrations and citizens in these communities have made it possible to identify both the actions that have been carried out and are feasible and the main obstacles that people have faced and continue to face in their daily lives.

In general, some common elements on which to reflect can be hypothesised. The transitional liminal status of many of the selected communities is characterised by geographical, political and social characteristics. In the first case, these are peripheral and marginal territories within urban and/or regional contexts that are themselves peripheral and marginal. Sometimes the peripherality is so marked (as, for example, in the case of Gela) that it results in isolation even with respect to the mobility flows characterising the area. In terms of social aspects, all communities are characterised by deep social fractures, widespread social and digital vulnerability, a rarefaction of social relations and social capital, and difficulty in having ideas and aspirations with respect to the future, both individual and, above all, collective. In addition, there is often environmental degradation in part linked to dilapidated, obsolete and chaotic urban structures and in part linked to the infrastructural and economic development interventions carried out in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, which still have profound consequences for communities. An example of this is the case of the 'Liquichimica' in Saline Ioniche, just after punta Pellaro, where the beach was gutted and the company lived for only 48 hours.

The second common dimension is mistrust in the ability of local and national institutions to activate policies and actions of real transformation and change to the status quo. Isolation is not only geographical, social and political but also negatively perceived in media representations that ignore or fail to support any process of empowerment and activation of liminal communities in the South.

The third dimension is the idea that everyone must look after his or her own interests and family. This is not, of course, the amoral familism described by Banfield in the 1950s³⁹ but rather a deep-rootedness of neoliberal individualism that does not allow for other ways of dealing with problems and opportunities for potential social development. It is a form of de-subjectivised individualism, different from that traditionally assumed in classical theories of liberalism.⁴⁰

³⁷ Hepp (2015, 2020).

³⁸ Barbas (2020).

³⁹ Banfield (1958).

⁴⁰ Sorice (2022, pp. 107–130).

Despite this general picture, individual liminal communities have tried and are trying to set up actions that attempt to address some of the issues just described. Among the actions on which we want to focus, the first is the push for the activation of groups of people, organisations, and citizens capable of mobilising themselves in relation to their own community. A thrust that often has difficulty emerging owing to the lack of awareness of the condition of liminality and marginality experienced by communities. On the other hand, the drive may arise from a problem (think of the environmental issue left by the petrochemical plant in Gela) or an opportunity (the case of participation in a *Fondazione con il Sud* call for proposals, as in the case of Pellaro in Reggio Calabria) experienced as coming from the outside that interacts with the assumed familiarity everyday life⁴¹ of individuals and organisations. On other occasions, it is something that stems from a meeting on other topics (tables on social policies promoted by the municipal administration, as in the case of San Severo) that 'forces' people to discuss together for a certain period, thus having the opportunity to deepen both mutual knowledge and the density of relations, the first step towards the constitution of micronuclei of social capital. Obviously, the thrust of a group is not the only one that enables the social development of community consciousness. In fact, as a second relevant dimension, communicative processes and media ecosystems play crucial roles as both opportunities and obstacles. In the first case, social media, on the one hand, and proximity and participatory digital platforms, on the other hand, offer an informal and formal space⁴² for people to come together who are not necessarily motivated by any particular endogenous or exogenous drive. To understand whether digital spaces can represent an opportunity, in Librino, the digital proximity platform has made it possible to reach those who would otherwise have been excluded from any democratic and participatory process. The virtuous circuit between digital participation and engagement in the territory has, in fact, enabled the use of 'community gardens', which have become the driving force behind a renewed push for the conscious use of spaces.⁴³ In Panebianco, the informal Facebook groups were able to see the activation of a portion of the community that decided to be part of the 'I am from Panebianco if...' group, recounting feelings, emotions and even ideas on the future of the neighbourhood. In other situations, on the other hand, digital spaces have been an obstacle to the development of relations because, as in Pellaro, digital platforms are either too sophisticated and difficult to understand or are still crude and, therefore, unable to keep up with what can be found in digital social media markets. The third communicative dimension is that of interpersonal, intra- and intragroup relations. In many liminal communities, one can find seamless dual presences (onsite and digital), where the intensification of relationships is the first relevant step that can anticipate the ability to imagine

⁴¹ Blokland (2017).

⁴² This is often unconscious for the former, while the latter generally have precise and delineated objectives, most of which can be located in the operating dynamics of digital capitalism (Srnicek, 2016).

⁴³ In this case, the role of the social centre and rugby club 'I briganti' (ASD Onlus) as a space of resistance and proposal should also be mentioned.

participatory processes. This aspect is often underestimated because it fails to be perceived as a 'concrete' aspect both by the people living in liminal communities and by those who have government roles and functions or by specific social actors (third sector organisations, trade unions). The centrality of relationships is "discovered" only when they facilitate broader and more articulated processes such as, for example, the construction of networks and partnerships that help to design projects in response to specific calls for proposals.

The immateriality of social relations and their value for social cohesion and mobility are certainly not a discovery of our reflection,⁴⁴ but what we highlight the distance between the awareness of their relevance and centrality in participatory processes and social development and in the strengthening of media ecosystems. In the first case, it is sufficient to refer to how the contrast with the hegemony of organised crime (present in many of the liminal communities examined) passes precisely through the terrain of positive social relations that oppose the widespread ones oriented towards exploitation and tacit submission. In the second case, the ability to, for example, expand the storytelling coming from liminal communities depends precisely on the density and quality of the social relations present. Indeed, individual experience becomes collective in liminal communities if and how it manages to navigate through relationships. This is, for instance, the case in Gela, where young mothers were able to participate and tell their stories owing to the relationships built through their daughters and sons participating in play activities with the volunteer educators of the Margi neighbourhood. A fluidity in relational communication is activated and becomes a resource for emancipation without being imposed or prescribed from the outside.

Finally, there is no less important reflection on participatory processes. In liminal communities, it is often complicated to start or facilitate a participatory process, but once the experience has been made, the training is continuous and particularly generative of innovative paths. In Gela, after a year of discussions with a small group of activists, the creation of an 'open space' with approximately 100 citizens (10% of the inhabitants) of the Margi neighbourhood was the starting point for a possible mobilisation and practice of resistance. In Fantasia, after almost two years, it was possible to have an 'open space' and a 'fishbowl' with more than 200 people who tried to discuss together the future of the neighbourhood and the city.⁴⁵ It seems that much time is needed to learn or relearn to participate, but in reality, it means coming to terms with those processes of individualisation, disconnection and a-politics that have characterised and still characterise the current phase of neoliberalism. Here, again, the trusting relationships and industrious patience that the initial promoting

⁴⁴ Bourdieu (1979), Forsè and Tronca (2005), Putnam (2001, pp. 41–51).

⁴⁵ The open space is an articulated moment of collaborative and participatory discussion and is based on an engagement technique known as "open space technology" (also often used in school learning processes: see, among others, van Woezik et al. (2019), as well as <https://openspaceworld.org/wp2/>). The fishbowl is a conversation technique in the form of a dialogue that follows precise rules of organisation and architecture—also spatial—of the group/community/class that carries out this activity; the use of the discussion space in a spatial space is also a specific element of the procedure of participation and collective construction of social meanings.

groups were able to build served to avoid interrupting the mobilisation of a movement and, at the same time, to keep alive communicative and relational processes that, to have a social impact, had to be extended to a larger number of the population of the liminal community. The issue of popularity is an unavoidable element that can neither be neglected nor ignored in processes of potential transformation of liminal communities.

However, can liminal communities truly change? Our first analysis revealed that there are lights and shadows in each community. One aspect that needs to be emphasised is certainly the temporal dimension because, barring particularly violent traumas (such as a natural or man-made disaster), daily life tends to remain within the canons of familiarity rather than change. The second aspect is certainly the role of local governments. When and if they succeed in working alongside the people in the communities, they also develop possibilities for building first political and then administrative conditions for change. The case of San Severo in the province of Foggia is significant because the local administrators and the local public administration have made themselves promoters of places of confrontation on an equal footing with third sector organisations and those from liminal communities. The third aspect is the openness of third-sector organisations and intermediate bodies to communities. This is not a secondary aspect, because it is through their daily presence in the difficulties and dealing with problems that people in liminal communities feel less alone and venture into battles that seem, at first sight, almost hopeless. The fourth aspect is the role that communicative ecosystems can play in representing and narrating change. We are not referring, of course, to the old experiences of civic journalism or *citizen journalism* (which are often variously understood) but, rather, to a complex system that interacts with communities, drawing sustenance from them to be able to also change and, sometimes, survive. In Gela, journalism professionals who had left the media system because they were threatened by organised crime decided to contribute to the creation of a neighbourhood communication system that would help change the discriminating and excluding narrative. In Pellaro, on the other hand, they became an integral part of supporting the digital communication strategy and visual identity of some products (beer and bergamot marmalade) whose sale fuels the territorial mutuality born around confiscated property. A militant and resistant digital communication that, in liminality, has found new spaces for creativity, imagination and freedom that have almost disappeared in institutionalised media.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Experiences of 'reuse' of digital communication are of course also present elsewhere in Europe (think of the case of Bremen, Germany), although with different characteristics from those we have been able to study in the liminal spaces of southern Italy.

4 Digital Technologies Between Citizenship and Self-Empowerment

In the experiences mentioned in the previous paragraph, the importance of adopting digital technologies and, more generally, of co-constructing digital ecosystems is evident. Although limitations—in terms of ownership structures, social control, market logics, and even the risks of manipulation in digital ecosystems—are evident, they nevertheless represent instruments of potential (and sometimes real) self-empowerment of subjects living in liminal spaces and, in particular, of vulnerable subjects.⁴⁷ Thus, the inevitable adoption of digital tools constitutes an opportunity, the risks of which nevertheless seem acceptable, at least within communities in which a dialogic and inclusive participatory practice has developed.

The discourse becomes more complicated when we refer to artificial intelligence (AI). First, there is a question of sustainability (the development of AI-based tools is costly in terms of energy and the environment), and second, there is still no 'participatory' culture in the implementation of AI, even though attempts have been made.⁴⁸ Not coincidentally, over the last few years, a new focus on the reliability of AI has emerged, particularly in the development of tools that respect human rights and are fair, transparent, safe and easily explainable—in their operating dynamics—to those who use them.⁴⁹ Then, there are economic issues: if the development of collaborative and independent digital spaces is complex but possible also owing to crowdfunding (think of the experiences of the independent browser 'Vivaldi', for instance, or of search engines such as 'Qwant' or 'SearXNG' or, again, of the many experiences of the fediverse⁵⁰), envisioning a collaborative and horizontal development of AI is not simple at the moment. The situation of the fast transformation of the platform society⁵¹ is not easy to analyse empirically.

Another aspect involves the short circuit between digital activism⁵² and AI, which, even more than digital spaces, still seems to be strongly controlled by a few global actors. The possibilities offered by digital activism are now an important part of studies on political participation and social engagement⁵³; the possibilities of using AI in implementing participatory processes and empowering citizens, especially those in vulnerable situations, certainly remain to be explored.

In the empirical cases summarised here, we have examined forms of participation that can be described as "hybrid". Along with the dynamics of democratic participation traditionally defined in international textbooks, we also consider hybrid

⁴⁷ Antonucci et al. (2024).

⁴⁸ Delgado et al. (2023).

⁴⁹ See, in this regard, the OECD website: <https://oecd.ai/en/>.

⁵⁰ Vivaldi: <https://vivaldi.net>; Qwant: <https://www.qwant.com>; SearXNG: <https://searxng.dev.it>. The fediverse is a set of 'federated' servers that, while remaining independent, can activate communication mechanisms, thus creating networks for publishing content on the web.

⁵¹ Van Dijck et al. (2018).

⁵² Kaun and Uldam (2018, pp. 2099–2106).

⁵³ Coleman and Blumler (2009), Postill (2012), Coleman (2017), Muldoon (2022).

participation processes involving online perspectives (and, potentially, in the future, applications of AI).

The first dimension lies on a continuum at the extremes of onsite and online participation. This does not mean that we will have onsite participatory processes in a certain amount and online processes in the remaining amount. However, hybridisation with a different configuration in each context also takes on singular characteristics.⁵⁴ For example, it is imaginable to activate a participatory process on how a public space should be managed for younger generations, to continue discussions on social media with those who cannot be present, and then to return to the territory with a greater number of participants and a greater awareness of the necessary actions to be taken. There is a continuity between onsite and digital knowledge that is now established in life experiences, even among non-digital natives.⁵⁵ The second dimension of hybrid participatory processes lies on the continuum between formality and informality. Examples of the first are participatory processes that can be imagined and constructed within urban regeneration paths within a public institutional framework. They often have the characteristics of a top-down process, with the sole purpose of building consensus on choices that have already been made without giving people a chance for real and effective participation.⁵⁶ Examples of the second aspect, on the other hand, are the participatory processes that arise spontaneously on the basis of different stimuli (a specific problem linked to the environment, an exceptional event, a change in the social context, etc.) and that see the use of tools that allow the opportunity to participate to be given to people who want it. We must note that in hybrid participation processes, the issue of digital inequalities does not disappear but is, at least partially, mitigated by the opportunity to be able to participate onsite without losing the thread that connects the entire participatory process for those with little digital capital. We highlight that there are no “perfect” participatory processes but rather paths that intersect the processes of refiguration of liminal communities, developing spaces and contexts, sometimes of development, often of resistance (even to the mobilising logic of populisms) and innovation.

Even if experiments with the use of AI in processes that support the empowerment of vulnerable people are still in their infancy (and, as we have said, pose numerous problems, including ethical ones), they represent a possibility that must be followed up and scientifically studied. AI represents an opportunity (not forgetting, of course, its risks), but it must be placed in a broader framework in which the various variables at play are explored and studied. In our view, it is necessary for AI—like the internet and digital ecosystems—to become spaces controlled by the “public” (not by governments and/or markets), in the logic proposed a few years ago by the “Public Service Internet Manifesto”. It is in this logic, we believe, that AI should be placed, and in this way, it could become an important tool to support human vulnerability or at least a tool to support the empowerment of subjects, regardless of whether they are in liminal spaces.

⁵⁴ Reckwitz (2020).

⁵⁵ Boccia Artieri et al. (2017).

⁵⁶ Sorice (2021).

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