Territories of Struggle:

Social Centres in Northern Italy Opposing Mega-Events.

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Abstract

The article takes into consideration the spatialised action of self-managed Social Centres in Northern Italy over the last 20 years. Considering Genoa, Turin and Milan, we outline the passage from the Fordist era to the post-industrial cities reconversion, which gave the space—both physical and political—for the emergence of Social Centres. The changes that occurred in the three cities in the following years introduced new features in urban space configuration and organisation. In this frame, we focus on three case studies that serve the purpose of illustrating the role of Social Centres contesting unfair space transformations: Genoa's Expo Colombiane in 1992, Turin's Winter Olympic Games in 2006 and Milan's Expo in 2015. The opposition to these "mega-events" allows us to analyse the changes related to the forms of conflict put into practice by urban social movements throughout time, and the learning process they underwent.

Introduction

This article investigates changes in urban movements' relationship with territory in Northern Italy, and explores the way in which the organisation and impact of mega-events, taken as emblematic examples of contemporary city management and neoliberal planning, have acted as a battleground and test bed for the development of new political and discursive strategies. In considering the 1992 Expo *Colombiadi* in Genoa, the 2006 Olympic Games in Turin, and Expo 2015 in Milan, we demonstrate how their associated territorial and planning changes have raised new questions and challenges for urban movements and CSOAs (*centri sociali occupati autogestiti* – squatted self-managed social centres).

Mega-events are seen here as more than merely affording opportunities to see neoliberal city management at work: they are rather symbols of a region's transformed economic role, and are tied to a new exploitation of cities' competitive advantage that is unrelated to actual regional resources and is instead dependent on a standardised concept of territorial value. This means that competitive advantages – functional to territorial promotion – are created each time from scratch, instead of being the result of the valorisation of local resources, as clearly demonstrated by the theme of food for the Expo in Milan.

Mega-events have offered enormous scope to redefine CSOAs' relationship with territory. Social centres initially had an instrumental concept of territory, which means that they intervened at the local level, the city or the neighbourhood, to address conflict at another level: indeed, they have prompted local reproduction of political analysis and practice addressed at a supralocal level – regarding class, political participation, and other issues. It is our contention that, given the transformation of the context in which CSOAs are embedded – that is, when the city becomes an autonomous actor in global dynamics – urban social movements are enabled to express a political understanding based and centred on locality, not only as a template for broader struggles, like before, but as the very political arena in which horizontal practices of direct participation and specific forms of protest can be tested.

CSOAs' engagement with territory has been transformed by cities' embrace of mega-events as "laboratories" for testing new models of urban territorial governance. This shift represents an opportunity for these subjects – and more broadly for urban social movements – to rearticulate political subjectivities, while at the same time requiring complex theoretical and practical work to achieve a genuine reconceptualisation of territory, from being a platform to oppose unjust class relations to becoming the field of struggle itself. These subjects had to remain connected to

"locality", while also avoiding the traps of "localisms", and this is precisely one of the key points social movements have learned in the transitions from Genoa to Turin to Milan. CSOAs' political tradition of squatting helps them in this process, given the potential this activity has to create political subjectivities out of practice, directly impacting on the urban space and suggesting alternative and subversive uses of it. The comparison between Genoa, Turin, and Milan is meaningful because of their historical association with the same regional and socio-economic structures that gave rise to similar and interconnected urban political movements, even if it has led to different outcomes in terms of city development and conflict relations. Milan, Turin, and Genoa are the three corners of the so-called "industrial triangle", the Northwest Italian region where, between the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, the country's most far-reaching industrialisation process occurred, generating the so-called "Italian miracle". Heavy industry was based in Milan; Turin was the car manufacturing centre; and Genoa was the country's most important port. The global economic and social crises of the early 1970s had a major impact on these cities: factories scaled back their operations, firing a large number of workers; industrial ports lost importance; and car manufacturing slowed down and relocated offshore.

In that period, self-managed social centres appeared as new collective actors that were to become typical of the Italian context. These informal groups emerged in factory districts through the illegal occupation of several brownfield sites, abandoned during the decline of the Fordist town. Empty warehouses, crumbling factories, and vacant schools became the base for self-organised cultural, social, and political activities by diverse groups of mainly young and leftist people (Dazieri 1996; Marincola 2001; Membretti 2003; Montagna 2006).

The initial political position of these social actors has evolved over time in tandem with social, economic, and territorial transformation: as new challenges have arisen, CSOAs have identified original strategies and practices to cope with the changing scenario. Our thesis is that mega-events and major public works have served as new battlegrounds for social movements and have provided the opportunity for reflection on real participation in decision making, rights related to territorial use, and the concept of commons. This theoretical political debate has led to the development of original practices, such as creative interventions in the landscape, alternative uses of space, mobilisations of civil society actors in defence of common spaces. From a political perspective, CSOAs have attempted to move from forms of counter-power within traditional government models towards a recognition and understanding of the new forms of city governance and the new key actors governing cities that can be exposed and contested. In more general terms, this evolution has

given CSOAs conceptual tools to reason upon and fight against mega-event as laboratories for the experimentation and implementation of neoliberal forms of governance, not only at the urban level.

This study calls for multiple theoretical references, ranging from the literature concerning social movements – and the peculiar case of Italian CSOAs – to theories framing the changes regarding contemporary city management and planning, as well as literature on the impact of mega-events and neoliberal urban governance. Where the literature of social movements is concerned, we consider and connect the analysis of the relationship between the local and extra-local dimensions in movements' action (Melucci 1989; della Porta and Diani 2006; Flesher Fominaya and Cox 2013) and the European literature on urban social movements and squatters, especially in relation to urban politics and transformation (Arampatzi and Nicholls 2012; Holm and Kuhn 2011; Martínez 2013; Kaika and Karaliotas 2014; Nicholls 2013), and we adopt the concept of social innovation (Moulaert et al. 2010; 2013; Vitale 2007). Where the current debate about mega-events is concerned, we examine the analysis of their impact on contemporary cities (Hiller 2000; Bobbio and Guala 2002; Burbank et al. 2001 and 2002; Guarrasi 2002), the theories which see these events as tools for government policy (Dansero et al. 2011; Hall 2006; Kang and Perdue 1994), and the debate about mega-events as Urban Regime growth strategies used to explain the structures of opportunities within which CSOAs exercise their counter-hegemonic strategies (Stone 1989; Stoker and Mossberger 1994).

These strands of analysis are combined with a particular and original focus on the political action of CSOAs, allowing us to go beyond the classical understanding of mega-events as outcomes of post-industrial urban planning and forms of urban marketing, and to contribute to a better understanding of these events as "laboratories" for the testing of new models for territorial governance. Conclusions presented in this article arise from the author's long-standing engagement with Milanese social movements and, in particular, participant observation from 2011 of the work of the Attitudine NO-Expo Milanese network, and the findings of nine qualitative interviews with key actors (three for each city). Interviews were held at the end of 2013 and during spring 2015.

We begin with a brief account of the changes that have characterised most western cities, and especially our three case studies, in recent decades, where mega-events have been introduced as growth strategies; secondly, we will focus on CSOAs and their evolution in the three case studies, starting with Genoa in 1992, continuing with Turin in 2005, and ending with Milan in 2015.

Mega-events as laboratories of neoliberal governance

The three cities analysed here were seriously affected by the transformation of industrial production in the Eighties and Nineties, when urban industrial economies entered a period of decline during which successful cities were those able to reinvent themselves through investment in art and culture, the service industry, and the non-profit sector. In a period when cities competed to achieve or maintain a successful position in the global arena, the response, even in the case of these three Italian cities, has been the promotion of change in urban spatial organisation as well as in city management, factors that have made cities test beds for neoliberal restructuring programs. These changes have affected the very structure of cities: the classic centre-periphery juxtaposition has moved towards the development of polycentric cities, with consequent changes in neighbourhoods' social composition – through gentrification, for example – and the reuse and reassignment of abandoned factories and areas for commercial and residential use.

Far from being a novelty, mega-events such as sports festivals, fairs, and exhibitions have become a political tool to attract investment and radically transform cities' images through targeted interventions justified by the event itself (Burbank et al. 2001). In an era when innovation and products have different channels for exhibition and diffusion, the establishment of thematic fairs mainly involves regional promotion and the securing of investments for large development projects. The Urban Regime Theory allows us to frame these growth policies within a broader economic, political, and spatial context (Stone 1989; Stoker and Mossberger 1994; Mossberger and Stoker 2001; Burbank 2001). Urban regimes are usually promoted, as a result of decline or as a response to crisis, by coalitions combining private and public interests, investing in urban regeneration and in the creation of new and successful city images. We will not go into a detailed examination of the coalitions on the edges of the events we analyse, but it is important to define this framework to indicate the socio-spatial opportunity structures (Martínez 2007) that constrained or expanded the field of action of CSOAs in the three case studies, and to introduce the theme of conflict to our reflection. Political opportunities are, together with the ability to create networks, essential elements for the development and characterisation of urban social movement (Arampatzi and Nicholls 2012). Particularly useful for our purposes are the typologies of urban regime proposed by Stoker and Mossberger (1994; 2001)[1], which highlight the variance in the goals pursued by local coalitions, stressing the importance of investment in a city's image through the organisation of mega-events. The constraints imposed by economic restructuring results in leaders of cities being motivated to employ resources for economic development to create or enhance the image of the city (Burbank et al. 2001). This ideological and cultural strategy aims to present the city as having the capacity to host a mega-event, and therefore to attract tourists, money, and investment. Regime Theory also

recognises the role of conflict and of interests other than development because "an urban regime is a mechanism for overcoming the obstacles to exercising power at the local level. A regime is thus a way to create policy stability and ensure urban governance." (*Ibid*: 24) The emergence of opposition to mega-events, or to specific development projects related to them, is therefore inherent to urban regimes, as is the existence of different, and often conflicting, ideas of urban growth. The conflicts arising in the three cases we analyse are embedded in the particular political situation of each and in the consequent context of political opportunities arising at the local level. Coalitions' interests oriented towards growth to the detriment of forms of social redistribution, as clearly demonstrated by Turin and Milan, involve mobilisation against investment in useless infrastructure instead of social housing or other forms of social redistribution (Mayer 2013). Genoa is different, since the interventions associated with the event's organisation have contributed to the redesign of part of the historical centre and the comprehensive rebuilding of the old port at a time when the administration was unable to finance such projects by itself. As we shall see, this structural difference affected both the protest and the public consensus concerning the events.

Differences in the post-industrial restructuring of Genoa, Turin, and Milan also have their impact on the kind of coalition built: analytically, they all conform to the typology of symbolic regimes, but with slight differences in the objectives pursued. In Genoa and Turin we can speak of an *urban revitalization regime* (Stoker and Mossemberger 1994), a subtype of symbolic regime that attempts to change a city's image to attract capital and ultimately facilitate economic development. The Expo *Colombiadi* and the Winter Olympic Games were organised at a time of serious economic crisis that required the invention of new urban growth strategies that included the creation of a successful post-industrial image that could replace and almost hide the grey industrial past. The organisation of Milan Expo 2015 presents a very different case, as the city is already well-used to one event following another – fashion weeks, the design week, etc. We can thus see a mix of *symbolic* and *instrumental regime*[s] (*ibid.*) at work here, where the regime aims to change land use to promote growth through selective incentives and with tangible results (Mossemberger and Stoker 2001) and symbols attributed to the region are instrumental and detached from its actual resources (like the theme of food in the case of Expo 2015). As we shall see in the analysis of the three cases, this difference has implications for the opportunity structures in which CSOAs act and consequently for their ability to understand processes and find adequate strategies and practices.

The relationship of mega-events with territory also suggests interesting ways to better analyse these interventions as "laboratories" for the testing of new models of governance. As well as serving as catalysts for funding and urban marketing, mega-events can also be used as a Trojan horse to justify

any intervention in the name of modernisation and city promotion as acceptable and necessary if the deadlines set by the event's organisers are to be met. An event's claimed urgency and inevitability are usually accompanied by the declaration of a state of emergency – in legislative terms – in which pressing deadlines and high stakes become the justification for the suspension of routine procedures related to stakeholders' accountability (Maggioni et al. 2013)[2]. Moreover, the defence of projects' sites from protests and demonstrations has introduced new approaches to the management of territory, involving the creation of specific institutions or special commissioners, the militarisation of the sites, and the suspension of legislation concerning people's access to them.

An open learning process: CSOAs challenging mega-events

A diachronic analysis of the three case studies, in spite of their different political opportunities, mobilisation capacities, and cultures (Uitermark et al. 2012: 2552), identifies common trends in the composition and action of CSOAs over almost two decades. In analysing changes in the Italian context, we consider CSOAs as pivotal actors that are able to build coalitions and to share methods and tools with less experienced or new local movements.

Italian Social Centres mainly developed within the extra-parliamentary left, and they initially called for a bottom-up participation in the transformation of power relations, based on the concept of self-representation of interests, which had to do primarily with running the physical squatted space as a liberated and participative public place. They proposed a particular approach to the definition of traditional class conflict, in cities that were understood to be political fields for building localised forms of counter-power, within a wider non-local and networked perspective (Nicholls 2013; Membretti 2007; Vitale 2007; Mudu 2004).

Through their opposition to mega-events we can see how some CSOAs have moved beyond the initial idea that these events simply presented an occasion for the expression of dissent towards the capitalist system and its consequences. Their learning process required a more pragmatic vision of conflict similar to that outlined by Yates about Barcelona's squats and their *micropolitics* (2014). Over time it is not only aims and practices that change, but also the way in which they are discussed, experienced, and expressed. This accompanies an attempt to create a broader social consensus in opposition to the neoliberal order that combines radical struggle with grassroots initiatives for alternative models[3].

In the first city we consider, Genoa, the protest against the Expo *Colombiadi* in 1992 reveals that CSOAs were then still tied to an ideological opposition to the event that was far removed from an

analysis of the territorial dynamics involved in the process. The events in Turin and Milan followed years in which social movements were able to develop a deeper understanding of mega-interventions' territorial impact: the legacy of other mega-events, as well as the challenge posed by major construction projects in different parts of Italy, have provided an opportunity to create networks and reflect on the real issues at stake in this form of development, especially where urban space is concerned. "Those who were able to learn from the experience gained from the [opposition to] major projects were then able to propose a different kind of protest." (F.P., activist, Milan)

The opposition to mega-events became increasingly proactive as interventions in the city introduced alternative uses of public space and posited a more general proposition of the city as commons. Examples of this kind of protest show the influence exercised by similar experiences outside the country (Kaika and Karaliotas 2014; Yates 2015; Martínez 2013) and range from playful demonstrations in areas affected by the events' spatial interventions to urban climate camps and creative uses of the city's infrastructure and buildings. In reflecting on the changes from Genoa to Milan, one of our interviewees said that "[opposition to mega-events] started as a cultural ideological issue, and went through a critique of territorial speculation, until we finally understand that the event itself is a guarantee of the process [of neoliberal restructuring]. Expo 2015 draws from financial as well as intellectual resources: in jeopardising the "right to the city", it prepares us for the city of the future." (A.D., activist, Milan)

Genoa 1992: the Expo *Colombiadi* and the emergence of CSOAs

Since their birth – and in line with the typical extra parliamentary left's factionalism – Social Centres have been politically divided into two main areas: the communist (Autonomia) and the anarchist one[4]. These two components share, however, a common repertoire of action based on the practices of self-management, squatting, counter cultural and music production, and other alternative forms of living. Throughout the Eighties and into the early Nineties Italian CSOAs' main concern was to assert themselves through resistance and the definition of their own identity and particular forms of belonging in contraposition to institutional politics, in a period characterised by a general ebb in political participation, the spread of terrorist-type political action, the rise in the use of heroin by young people, and harsh police repression of social movements.

It was in this period that the Expo *Colombiadi* took place in Genoa, where a local movement of CSOAs had yet to exist, and where ideological positions were the dominant concerns of squatters and political activists.

Like the other two cities in our study, Genoa had suffered a harsh deindustrialisation process, having been one of the country's major industrial areas and its leading merchant port. The deep recession of the Seventies had a major impact on the local economy: factories and construction sites closed down one after the other; the docks emptied; and trades unions and left-wing parties gradually declined. Meanwhile, the old town was slowly abandoned and the city entered a long period of economic and social depression that lasted throughout the Eighties (Barroero, 1999). In this context the CSOAs movement developed only in the years immediately following the 1992 Expo *Colombiadi*, later than in Turin and Milan. Indeed, during the Eighties the city's only social centre was the *Officina*, which was evicted just before the Expo.

At the beginning of the Nineties important transformations occurred in CSOAs all over Italy[5]: they opened their occupied spaces to the outside world, with repercussions both in terms of inner composition and practice. New people became involved, and this was augmented by the emergence in 1990 in many Italian cities of the *Pantera* student movement, which engaged a new and more pragmatic generation of young people with new cultural and political interests. CSOAs also opened themselves to experimenting with new languages, including music, pre-eminently through *Posse*, the collective name for politicised hip-hop bands that contributed to the spread of squatters' and activists' messages and ideologies. This transformation led to a more open relationship with civil society and with the area's other actors and stakeholders (even institutional ones). In the Nineties CSOAs became providers of public services – self-organised welfare suppliers – open to a range of people, focusing on a non-commodified form of sociality and offering a space for encounter free from market or institutional regulation (Mudu 2012).

This was paralleled by an attempt to institutionalise various illegal activities – a phenomenon that concerned squatting experiences all over Europe (see Holm and Kuhn 2011; Martínez 2012) – with the main aim of reducing the difficulties resulting from the continuous struggle for resistance and against eviction. Negotiations involved the squatters' movement, institutions, and radical left parties, and led to deep fragmentation in the movement itself, accompanied by critical reactions from those who considered the practice of illegal squatting as an essential element of CSOAs' identity (like in the case of Berlin's squatters described by Holm and Kuhn 2011). This process also encompassed the three studied cities, but it had different outcomes than it did in other Italian cities, largely because of the different political circumstances. In Milan the process of institutionalisation did not work at all; it worked only partially in Genoa; and in Turin it began much later and with little success.

At the beginning of this transformation a new phase of urban conflict began in Genoa after the

eviction of *Officina*, when many of the groups that made up the social centre rented new city centre premises that became one of the main reference points for the network opposing the Expo *Colombiadi*.

> We can say that 1992 was a turning point for social movements in Genoa. […] It marked the closure of the previous phase tied to themes and ideologies typical of the Seventies and the Eighties and related to the political groups that had maintained the inner hegemony in that period, that is primarily the area of *Autonomia* (R.D., activist, Genoa).

In this context of strong social and political transformation, the opposition to the *Colombiadi* was based on a critique that "did not originate from the event itself, but rather from its focus on colonialism, which well reflected the more general antagonistic discourse against imperialism" (R.D. activist, Genoa). Moreover, Genoa did not have a tradition of event organisation or territorial intervention directly aimed at economic growth, and the Expo *Colombiadi* represented the first attempt by Genoa's then social democratic administration to create a new image for the city following a *symbolic revitalisation regime* as previously described. If measured by visitor numbers the event was a huge failure, but its impact on the city was significant, as "the old port was in terrible condition and the *caruggi* [the typical alleys of Genoa's old city centre] were in a state of neglect. Some collateral effects of the Expo were good." (R.S., activist, Genoa) These interventions were all justified by and financed through the Expo, which was the occasion for the revitalisation of the waterfront and the pedestrianisation of the city centre. The use of a mega-event to attract funding and investors was regarded positively by citizens, especially after more than a decade of economic crisis and recession.

It is important to remember that in 1992 there was no national network of movements protesting against major projects or infrastructure. Later this network constituted a genuine way of developing awareness about common goods and popular participation in decision making, essential for the interpretation of mega-events as a laboratory for new and unjust regional policies.

Despite general enthusiasm for public projects related to the event, the Genoa movement was able to go beyond the ideological contestation of colonialism and highlight some of the unjust mechanisms underlying the event and its implementation. The contestation was effected through a network of associations and activists "primarily composed of CSOAs, a section of the Catholic world, pacifist organisations, and the *ARCI* network [a large national leftist association]" (R.S., activist, Genoa)[6].

Criticism of the Expo *Colombiadi* focused on three main aspects:

- The celebration of the discovery of America by Columbus was actually a glorification of Western imperialism and the extermination of Native Americans. The main slogans of the protests were: "There is nothing to celebrate!" and "500 years is enough!"

- The implementation of the Expo included urban interventions with a major environmental impact that threatened the structure of the city centre and undermined the environmental balance of the region.

- The organisational machine of the *Colombiadi* was strongly characterised by corruption and political nepotism, which came to light especially in the area of public-private contracts and subcontracts for the construction of buildings and infrastructure.

The No-Expo committee protested through demonstrations and public assemblies on the theme of natives' rights and colonialism that were mainly held in the university in collaboration with student activists. One of the few successful actions related to the protest was the opposition to the diversion of streams in Genoa's environs, which gained more visibility and attracted more participation than other forms of opposition to the Expo. This is in line with more detailed thinking about the extreme impact such projects have on particular areas, the environment, and citizens' lives as an impetus for an increase in interaction between CSOAs and civil society. However, in 1992 this particular action had no actual effect, nor did it raise awareness about the shift in the local governance and the exclusion of civil society from decision making.

Turin 2006 and the Winter Olympic Games

The Nineties marked a new phase in youth unrest all over Italy: in major cities, including Genoa, Turin, and Milan, several new CSOAs opened, and many old ones underwent important changes both in their internal organisation and their aims and political objectives: "[F]or the first time we worked around laboratories and affinities instead of ideological areas" (A.D., activist, Milan). This, together with the emergence of new communication and interaction technologies[7], led to the creation of networks with other political movements outside the country and the beginning of the so-called alter-globalisation movement. This brought new influences and ideas, especially about practice, and let to the slogan "think globally, act locally" (see Mayer 2013).

In the second half of the Nineties the CSOAs of Genoa, Turin, and Milan attempted to constitute a network (the *laboratorio nord-ovest*) based on "elements of presumed communality shared by the three territories and their inhabitants, and especially taking into account similar economic and social transformations, though with different local effects" (F.P., activist, Milan). A much stronger impetus

for the creation of a network was the opposition to the construction of the TAV (*Treno ad Alta Velocità*), the new high-speed railway planned to link Turin to Lyon. Social movements and urban squats, beginning in Northern Italy, found a common focus in their opposition to the TAV (della Porta and Piazza 2008; della Porta et al. 2013), which became emblematic of bottom-up struggles for the defence of commons and the participation of local actors in decision making: over time the mobilisation has extended its links and networks and to different areas of civil society[8].

Our local informants consider the role of CSOAs in the No-TAV movement to be key, at least to the organisation of public actions and demonstrations, and to specialising in the 'manufactured vulnerability' (Doherty 1999) of occupying and sabotaging strategic construction sites. In this sense they also recognise how the experience gained in opposing this major project has been important to both create and enforce relationships with different actors, and to develop a new understanding of collective action in the defence of territory.

On the other hand, the Turin administration, led by a democratic left-wing party, was also able to promote consensus by casting the event city as a panacea to cure every ill of the still recession struck city. At the end of the Nineties, Turin was undergoing a transformation involving both its physical structure and its image: the consequences of deindustrialisation had to be controlled and reoriented through the construction of a new imaginary that could replace FIAT (the leading Italian car manufacturer) and the intense industrial activity of the past. The city was shaped physically and symbolically as an "event city", a polyfunctional urban area able to offer venues, accommodation, services, and an environment attractive to event promoters[9]. The *symbolic revitalisation regime* relied on the Winter Olympic Games as leverage to promote Turin's new image within an Alpine context that was far-removed from its industrial working class past. At the idea's core was the belief that the success of an Olympic city depended on its ability to produce urban transformation and regional infrastructure (the "material legacy" of the event) within an overall cultural and communicative framework, capable of expressing new identities (its "intangible heritage") (Bobbio and Guala 2002; Mela 2002).

Public opinion broadly supported the administration's line in the context of a general mood that has been described by our interviewees as "collective intoxication".

> The municipality was able to create an across-the-board consensus around the Olympic Games, also apparent from the high number of volunteers involved in the Games. In this way people took part in the construction of a territorial identity related to the mega-event (C.G., sociologist and activist, Turin).

The Winter Olympic Games were therefore both a key strategic event in the hands of the administration and a new target for local social movements, which saw them as the latest of many manifestations of speculative top-down urban development planning based on the same economic logic and regional impact of mega-projects such as the TAV. People active during these years recall the police's forceful intensification of repressive action against CSOAs, especially from 2004, with an increase in the eviction of squats and occupied buildings, and an attempt to remove unwanted elements – including squatters – from areas targeted for urban transformation. The aim was "to clean up the city and prepare it to become the tourist capital of the Alps" (C.G., activist, Turin). Evictions and repression were fundamental catalysts for the constitution of the network opposed to the Olympic Games, because the Games were the shared backdrop for squatters in their struggle against eviction. Born in the context of resistance struggle, the opposition to the Olympics "timidly started to counterpose an alternative [model] for those who care and love the environment to the Olympic model that was spoiling the mountains as the TAV had" (A.D., activist, Milan). "In that period Turin's activist movement was also focused on the closure of the FIAT automobile industry and thus on analysing and questioning the transition from an industrial to an events town" (C.G., Activist, Turin). For part of the movement the debate focused on how to enable forms of grassroots participation in urban planning, especially in the area of participatory budgeting (following the Porto Alegre model) and building a city based on real needs and on solidarity.

After the announcement of Turin's candidacy to host the Winter Games, criticism was directed at several dimensions of the event for:

- the devastating regional and environmental impact of Olympic construction projects, with related questions about the post-Olympics use of sport facilities and their high maintenance (or dismantling) costs;
- the waste of public money in the construction of the Games' facilities, considered unreasonable at a time of public spending cuts;
- the proposed event-city model, seen as inconsonant with Turin's social history;
- the use of private sponsorship, considered a direct expression of neoliberal economic power and a negative symbol of the market/profit logic;
- the massive exploitative employment of volunteers and underpaid workers during the Games, reflecting the ongoing transformation of the job market and precarisation of workers.

As we can see, ideological positions were expressed alongside new ideas about the defence of public space, even though they were not yet organically articulated around the event. Moreover, their translation into some form of mobilisation faced great difficulties, mainly because of the

general consensus created for the Winter Games, but also because of protestors' inability to find a new language and methods to involve people in the struggle. Even the political and cultural milieu usually closer to the world of CSOAs – as seen in the case of the No-TAV movement – was difficult to involve, and the protest was generally considered unpopular.

CSOAs were able to organise a series of actions and events against the Olympic Games, but public opinion often seemed to regard them as spoilsports interested in opposition for its own sake.

> We organised a demonstration against the Olympic torch in our neighbourhood. We didn't want to block the torch, just to protest against it. But they changed the route of the torch so that the day after they wrote in the newspaper that the demonstrators from the *Gabrio* social centre had made children cry because they hadn't seen the torch going through their neighbourhood. Teachers were not informed, probably intentionally, about the change of route and the kids were really crying – but that had not been our intention! (B.G., Activist, Turin).

Mobilisation in the valleys surrounding Turin was more successful, perhaps because of the ongoing struggle against the TAV and, as already noted in the case of Genoa, because of its local character. CSOAs were as yet unable, however, to channel these localised struggles into a more general opposition to the event as a symbol of territorial exploitation.

The No-TAV movement survives, and, long after the Olympic Games' closing ceremony, has developed as a cohesive force and collective protest, whereas public opinion in Turin has only now begun to see the impact of the Games in the abandonment, deterioration, or unsustainable maintenance costs of Olympic buildings and facilities. The experience gained and networks created through No-TAV and other protests against mega-projects[10] have provided an essential network, at the national level, to create links between the different localised struggles and between those and broader social movements, and has also given the opportunity to connect different actors with different backgrounds (della Porta et al. 2013; Arampatzi and Nicholls 2012).

Milan 2015: the Universal Expo "Feed the Planet"

The climax of the Italian alter-globalisation movement came with the opposition to the G8 summit in Genoa in 2001 and its repercussions were felt into the mid-2000s. Meanwhile, a new wave of repression and evictions hit the social centre movement, especially in cities like Milan where most squats had not been involved in the institutionalisation process.

This suggests a lack of continuity in CSOAs' experiences: "[W]e always have to start from scratch, because of both the continuous evictions and the lack of a unanimous movement. We build

temporary networks around single projects or campaigns, at best" (A.D., activist, Milan). As in other European countries (Martínez 2007), in these years CSOAs faced a major crisis that highlighted the movement's "inability to connect the global experience at the local level" (F.P., activist, Milan). The strength demonstrated by the activist movement before and during the alter-globalisation period was seriously damaged by internal division and the challenge of the disillusionment experienced by many at the anti-G8 protests in Genoa. In this climate Milanese CSOAs gradually retreated, becoming less and less rooted in their neighbourhoods, which were themselves undergoing gentrification and suffering the pressure of radical structural transformation. For nearly two decades until 2011 Milan was governed by right-wing mayors, who emphasised its status as a post-capitalist event and business oriented city. The urban regime without doubt privileged private interests and pushed economic growth through forceful speculative investment in the construction industry. The focus was on the realisation of major construction projects that would guarantee financial investment and economic profit, rather than on a broader strategy for a sustainable and equitable city.

This enhanced the ability of social centre activists to recognise and understand features of neoliberal urban restructuring and management, an ability that proved useful in confronting the organisation of Expo 2015. Yet activists found it harder to unveil the political and economic intentions underlying the cycle of the city's events: "Milan was a difficult territory because the event's dynamic had already been completely accepted: no one would discuss the Expo. The city lives with the cycle from one event to the next" (A.D., activist, Milan).

Milan's candidacy for hosting the Expo was announced in 2006, exactly when activism was at its lowest ebb, and the city was undergoing a series of major structural changes that were completely reshaping it, creating a new skyline, and providing the city with new residential and office areas. A No-Expo committee existed as early as 2007, initially focusing on the production of alternative dossiers and information – an important feature of CSOAs' experience, *autoformazione* (self-training). Some CSOAs and activist groups were part of the committee and this phase was fundamental in creating the expertise protesters needed to publicly challenge the propaganda of the administration and Expo organisers[11].

In recent years, a new wave of activism has highlighted a different kind of metropolitan bonding, often linking CSOAs with other subjects from civil society and adopting innovative political practices, as in other experiences in Europe (Yates 2015; Martínez 2013). New actors emerged in Milan, especially in the suburbs, that were increasingly concerned with the city's metropolitan development.

Between 2007 and 2010 various events were organised, among them a No-Expo climate camp, which represented an innovative and effective practice for Italy (della Porta et al. 2013). 2012 marked a new phase in mobilisation, especially promoted by the *Off Topic* collective based in the *Piano Terra* social centre, and defined by the participants as the "No-Expo Attitude". The network brings together activists from other CSOAs, such as *Fornace* and *Boccaccio*, two squats located in the metropolitan area of Milan that was concerned with Expo 2015.

However, and paradoxically, the change in the local government – the left won the elections in 2011 – has reduced the scope for protest: "[T]he change in the make-up of the city council has actually brought continuity with previous governments. However, after twenty years of right-wing mayors, the citizens who voted for Pisapia [the new Mayor] were reluctant to criticise the council's first "achievement", even though Expo was a legacy of previous councils' decisions" (A.D., activist, Milan).

The main counter-arguments advanced by the No-Expo network stem from a broader analysis of its significance for and impact on the city and the surrounding region, and they show a deep understanding of the mechanisms underlying neoliberal forms of governance and city management. No-Expo activists summarise their 'No' in three main points:

- debt: the costs of the exhibition are unsustainably high and rely mainly on public actors, whereas the management of the event is private and only partially controllable by public institutions; these expenses remove monies from social expenditure and complicate the task of imagining an alternative urban development.

- concrete: the theme of Expo 2015 is "feed the planet", and is completely detached from its actual interventions: the project involves wide urbanisation while promoting environmental sustainability, and the emerging urban growth model is based on real estate speculation and land exploitation.

- precariousness: Expo 2015 promises an increase in employment, while only increasing the number of precarious jobs (internships, temporary and irregular contracts). New and flexible contracts are being introduced, justified by the event's "exceptional" character, which in turn is affecting national employment regulation.

Attention is drawn to Expo's function as a laboratory, an advanced *dispositif* of territorial governance, to both experiment with and import radically new regulations and procedures[12] (Guareschi and Rahola 2011). "With its original and instrumental use of the excuse of emergency, Expo has somehow become a subversive model, anticipating national political reforms in employment regulation and regional intervention" (A.D., activist, Milan).

The mobilisation developed against the *Vie d'acqua* project (a network of canals linking the site of the Expo to already existing canals in the city) has seen the establishment of local committees of people directly affected by the project that were collaborating with CSOAs involved in the "No-Expo Attitude" movement. This has probably been the most successful action undertaken by the No-Expo network and, again, shows how the defence of the commons – public parks and green areas in this case – can, more than other protests, raise awareness about neoliberal processes of governance at work[13]. As with other successful examples of this kind of protest, the No-Canal campaign is an expression of local interests, but the difference in the Milanese case has been the CSOAs' ability to amplify and distance the protest from mere neighbours' dissatisfaction towards a wider and more visible opposition to the out-workings of particular political mechanisms.

> "The No-Canal struggle was a "not in my back yard" affair, but you have to be able to connect it with similar experiences and suggest practices and imaginaries. The alchemy between local committees and CSOAs has introduced new ways of interpreting the No-Canal issue beyond the simple "don't touch my park" approach. The real goal is to succeed in linking each resistance with a more general discourse. If you see the flyers now being distributed by the various No-Tem, No-Pedemontana[14], etc, groups, they are against Expo, not just against their small issue. From a political theoretical point of view, this is a success. Even then, of course, you never win…" (A.D., activist, Milan).

The last review of the article has been carried out almost eight months after the closing ceremony of Expo 2015, while its first writing goes back before the opening. After the closing ceremony, CSOAs and the NO-Expo attitude network continues to work on the consequences of the event, on a territorial and political level, and concern regards the destination of the area interested by the Expo. Interestingly enough, the special commissioner of the Expo was nominated for local elections by the Democratic Party and became the new mayor of Milan in June 2016. This outcome stands in line with the NO-Expo movement's analysis of the connections between mega-events, politics and urban governance, that they ended defining as the "Milanese Expo Party".

Concluding remarks

Over the last twenty years the Italian "industrial triangle" has undergone a process of radical change in its physical structure as well as in its function and economic and social organisation. The transition to a post-industrial era, characterised by recursive and increasingly severe economic and

financial crises, has forced urban movements to seek forms of social innovation and creative adaptation to a radically new and considerably more complex environment.

What has happened and is still happening – especially where the emergence of a neoliberal ideology and its pseudo-democratic models of governance are concerned – can be understood in its relationship with the history of CSOAs that, more than other social movements, have bonded their action within a spatial dimension. It is productive to focus on the urban dimension of conflict because "analysis of cities and movements requires, first, a reading of the role of cities as incubators of wider struggles and, second, accounting for the ways the local state affects the sociospatial development of social movements" (Uitermark et al. 2012: 2552).

Structural changes – paradigmatically represented by the three analysed mega-events and the idea of urban development they involve – have forced CSOAs to a shift that can be read as a form of creative adaptation. Over time CSOAs have developed the ability to understand and politically manage the complexity of contemporary governance and to unveil the exploitation of events to create temporary emergency situations in which new approaches to territorial governance can be tested.

The activist movement has needed to rethink itself and its environment to avoid disappearing in the transition to a radically different economic, social, and urban model. Mega-events thus appear to be a symbolic test bed for this reflective learning: they have offered the opportunity for these actors to open themselves to an increasingly globalised territory through forms of action that in many cases assume the character of social innovation (Moulaert et al. 2010).

In the relationship between CSOAs and the urban transformations related to mega-events it is possible to find the reappearance of territory (Membretti 2003), though expressed and analysed in new forms and languages. Over twenty years territory and locality have come to the fore through different political and administrative events and transformation (Mayer 2013): from the Tangentopoli[15] scandal – which involved citizens' lack of confidence in parties and institutional politics – to constitutional reforms that changed electoral rules – creating the possibility to directly elect mayors and regional governors. This has allowed a repositioning of CSOAs that were able, more than other actors – especially the institutional ones – to find new tools and to develop a new conceptualisation of territory from being a platform to oppose unjust class relations to becoming the field of struggle itself.

The mobilisation against mega-events appears to gain consensus and citizens' involvement when it takes visible and assessable interventions on the territory, conducted in a relatively short timeframe and the effects of which are clear. The real success of protest, however, consists in taking these

basic mobilisations to a higher level, developing a discourse on mega-events as models of neoliberal governance or laboratories of new, and usually unfair, urban policies.

The difficulties encountered by CSOAs in doing this raise questions about the contradictions posed by the focus on territory which represents a political opportunity, but, at the same time, requires a sophisticated and complex analysis and elaboration if "not in my back yard" or overly-local methods of protest are to be overcome. The opportunity to start from this level and gain consensus and participation at a wider level is still rare, but we can see an attempt by CSOAs to plug the gap and be reflexive about the dangers inherent to territorial struggles.

Given that the realisation of mega-events involves the emergence of a new model of territorial control by dominant political and economic actors – a model based on an emergency logic and the exclusion of citizens from decision making – CSOAs have learned, from Genoa on, to speculate about (and sometimes build) embryos of alternative imaginaries and possibilities of bottom-up governance that seem of great interest for both the dynamics they trigger and the potential they have.

The opposition to mega-events, which started as a pretext to manifest a dissent that was still very tied to the ideological canons of the recent industrial past and to the model of Western development, has slowly evolved into an opportunity to build networks of action extended to civil society and aimed at influencing, here and now, the distortions of the present neoliberal social model (Membretti and Mudu 2013).

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1 This typology, including organic, instrumental and symbolic regimes, was developed by the two authors to adapt Stone's Theory to the European context and allow comparative analysis on Urban Regimes.

2 The Italian case is peculiar because of its well-known problems related to corruption, organised crime, and decision makers' collusion between them and the political arena. These peculiarities been clearly demonstrated in the management and implementation of major works or infrastructure, which have been a test bed for civil society and social movements to understand the instrumental use of these projects by public and private actors.

3 For a more detailed analysis of Italian CSOAs in terms of composition and internal governance, see Mudu 2004; Membretti and Mudu 2013.

4 A typical feature of Italian political movements was an inner division according to ideological and organisational points of view into two main political areas: the communist (Autonomia) and the anarchist. In a rather simplistic but useful way, we can reduce the difference to a few main points: the former is generally more interested in creating a large social consensus around its socio-political initiatives and appears more open to some dialectic with local authorities, although inside a conflictual frame; the latter is focused on radical and direct action, with a strictly antagonistic approach toward any kind of political institution. For a detailed discussion on this feature of Italian Social Centres, see Mudu 2012.

5 An important turning point was the eviction of the Leoncavallo social centre in 1998 and subsequent new occupations and several local and national demonstrations, which led, in 1994, to a famous "demonstration of social opposition", which afforded proof of the strength of the Italian social centre movement, and opened a phase of increased interaction with both civil society and institutions, at least for a consistent part of the movement.

6 On Catholic associations' involvement in the Italian social movement, see also Tosi and Vitale 2009.

7 In the Nineties Italian CSOAs were pioneers in the experimentation of hacklabs and subversive uses of media (see Autistici & Inventati 2012).

8 As has been noted, this new focus on territorial commodification, besides serving to spread "nimby" protests, has constituted a common denominator in protest movements – an alternative to the one based on class conflict – and the mobilisation of new actors (Caruso 2010).

9 Besides the Winter Olympic Games, Turin has begun to host several events and fairs, such as the Fiera del Libro (the biggest book fair in Italy), the Salone del Gusto (food fair), Artissima (art happening).

10 Some of the most influential and biggest protests were No-Ponte (protesting against the construction of a bridge linking Calabria and Sicily), No-Mo.S.E. (against the project of an integrated marine system to protect Venice from flooding), No-Grandi Navi (opposing the docking of big ships in the Bay of Venice), No-Dalmolin (against a US military base in the territory of Vicenza).

11 This has been demonstrated by the participation of activists in radio and TV programmes, their activities on social network platforms (especially the use of twitter that provides interaction with institutional accounts related to Expo), and the continuous production of theoretical and analytic dossiers.

12 The national Employment Act and Sblocca Italia legislative Decree are an example of this.

13 The initial project proposed for the Expo was radically reshaped: the expected network of canals and green areas became a single canal crossing a series of municipal parks with interventions that involve the reduction of green areas. After the mobilisation of the inhabitants of the areas affected by the project, construction was suspended.

14 TEM and Pedemontana are two motorway link roads built in the Milan metropolitan region that resulted in citizens' protests. The planning goes back to before the Expo candidacy, but its realisation happened under the Expo umbrella.

15 Tangentopoli was a famous investigation into bribes and corruption that led to the fall of the administration and the incarceration of many public and political figures both at the national and local levels.

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