

Territories of Struggle: Social Centres opposing Mega-Events in Northern Italy

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The paper 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.

In the past, social centres had an instrumental concept of territory, which means that they reproduced at the local level – the city or the neighbourhood – practices and analysis addressed at a supralocal level, regarding class, political participation, and other issues. It is our contention that, given the transformation occurred to cities' governance and their changed role in the global scenario, urban social movements have become able 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.

This shift represents an opportunity for CSOAs – 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.

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. 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.

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.

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.

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, held at the end of 2013 and during spring 2015.

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