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## **Urban Regimes and the Right to the City: An Analysis of the No Expo Network and its Protest Frames**

In Milan, the year 2015 meant the arrival of Expo. Presented to public opinion as an opportunity for the renaissance of Italy with a great investment in economic and symbolic resources, it offered almost no space for critical viewpoints. Nevertheless, numerous groups gathered around the No Expo Network, creating a contentious coalition opposing both the 2015 event, and more generally, the idea of development proposed by such mega-events. This article will study the nature of contemporary urban regimes and the role of discursive and political opportunity structures in shaping the frames of social movements.

By means of semi-structured interviews, frame analysis and participation in protests and other similar events, the internal composition of the No Expo Network was mapped, analysing its main arguments and rhetoric of opposition, especially focusing on the theme of the 'right to the city'.

**Keywords:** Expo; Italy; mega-events; right to the city; social movements; social networks.

### **Introduction**

From May to October 2015, Milan hosted the Universal Exposition under the motto 'Feeding the planet, energy for life.' This was an important (and discussed) showcase for the city itself, offering worldwide visibility to all public and private actors involved. It was also the rallying point for several individual and collective actors opposing neoliberal politics, mainly gathered around the No Expo Network and connected with other important Italian anti-capitalist movements (e.g.: No Tav, No Dal Molin, No Muos, No Mose).

Whilst the reasons explaining why the Exposition would have been welcomed by everybody are well known (being abundantly presented during the event), less known are the criticisms against it. In this article, the focus will not be placed on the evolution of certain important juridical aspects

involving public administration and private constructors before and during 2015 (see: Barbacetto and Maroni, 2015; Moccia, 2015). Rather, the aim will be to reconstruct the main characteristics of the No Expo Network, its internal composition, and its rhetoric of opposition.

The research questions can be thus presented as follows:

RQ 1: Who were the central actors of the No Expo Network?

RQ 2: What were the main arguments, strategies, and rhetoric of the No Expo Network?

To begin the analysis, the next section will briefly examine the main characteristics of the preparation and realization of Expo 2015, along with the main steps taken in opposition to it, in order to provide readers with an overview of the situation. Then, a relevant literature review will take place, regarding two aspects in particular: 1) mega-events as urban revitalization regimes; 2) and a frame analysis and discursive opportunity structure in social movement studies, with specific reference to the No Expo Network context. After the theoretical framework, results of fieldwork will be presented, based on a frame analysis of the main No Expo files and on 8 semi-structured interviews with leaders of social movement organizations (SMOs). Specific attention will be paid to the issue of the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre, 1968) given the prominence it acquired over the years of mobilization, especially thanks to the leading role assumed by local *Centri Sociali Occupati Autogestiti* (CSOAs: squatted self-managed Social Centres.) In addition, how the central theme of Expo 2015 was omitted, that is to say, food, will be explored.

It bears noting that the present research began as a sort of ‘militant research’ (Shukaitis, Graeber and Biddle, 2007; Halvorsen, 2015; Russell, 2015), given the author’s appreciation for the main No Expo arguments and his participation in actions not only carried out by the No Expo Network itself but more generally by Italian anti-capitalist movements (in different ways related to the No Expo Network) in the past few years. The decision to reflect on this mobilization was then due to the necessity, on the one hand, to address a neglected aspect of recent national opposition to neo-liberal gospel, and on the other hand to highlight some weak points of the protest and its partial failure, also in light of the current situation in the city of Milan, as discussed in the conclusions. More generally, this paper offers an example of a descriptive analysis of a recent Italian mobilization event against mega-events, in line with other important works regarding, for example, Genoa’s Expo Colomiane in 1992 (Casaglia, 2016) and Turin’s Winter Olympic Games in 2006 (Bobbio and Guala, 2002; Casaglia, 2016).

## 1. Contextualization

On 31 March 2008, the BIE (Bureau International des Expositions) awarded Milan the 2015 edition of the Universal Exposition, with the theme 'Feeding the planet, energy for life'. The organization was assigned to Expo 2015 S.p.a., a company created in October 2008 by the Italian Government, Lombardy Region, Province of Milan, City of Milan, and Chamber of Commerce of Milan. The Universal Exposition is a mega-event (Roche, 2000; Muller, 2015; Gruneau and Horne, 2015) which, according to latest provisions of the BIE, takes place every five years and lasts a maximum of six months, with the first such event of the modern era held in London in 1851. Milan has hosted the event twice in the city's history, the 2015 Milan Expo held more than a century after its predecessor in 1906. A total of 142 countries participated in Expo 2015, alongside international organizations (e.g. the United Nations, European Union, Caribbean Community), large corporations (e.g. Coca Cola, Joomoo, New Holland) and a number of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) who all gathered in the pavilion named Cascina Triulza.

Beginning in 2007, protests of the event were initiated by the No Expo Committee, created by the main local CSOAs. However, while they persisted within the constant tension of inactivity and visibility (Melucci, 1996), mobilization efforts focused primarily on specific events: the No Expo Festival in May 2010, the No Expo Climate Camp in June 2012, and the large-scale demonstrations in October 2014 and May 2015, for example.

On 1 May 2015, two events of particular importance took place: while the 2015 edition of the Universal Exposition was inaugurated in Rho (a small town north-west of Milan), the centre of Milan witnessed its customary May Day Parade, yet on this occasion, with specific reference made to the mega-event, the march was effectively transformed into a No Expo May Day protest (<http://www.noexpo.org/mayday/>) focusing on three keywords: debt, concrete, precariousness ('debito, cemento, precarietà' in Italian), and insisting on the theme of the 'right to the city'.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Mega-events as Urban Revitalization Regimes and the Opposition against Them

In one of his seminal works, David Harvey (1982) pointed out that cities, because they are places of surplus production, have become fundamental to test the global strategies of contemporary capitalistic accumulation (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Veron, 2006; Burbank, Andranovich and Heying, 2001). The same point was more recently addressed by urban regimes theorists (Mossberger and Stoker, 2001; Burbank, Andranovich

and Heying, 2001). Urban regimes correspond to wide private and public coalitions, often involving actors belonging to the entire political spectrum. They normally rise in response to a crisis or, more generally, to revitalize the image of a city and to simultaneously promote particular interests (Burbank, Andranovich and Heying, 2001). According to the well-known definition proposed by Mossberg and Stoker (2001: 812), “regime analysis views power as fragmented and regimes as the collaborative arrangements through which local governments and private actors assemble the capacity to govern.”

In this regard, the strict connection between mega-events (Roche, 2000; Muller, 2015; Gruneau and Horne, 2015) as one of the main ‘dispositifs’ (Foucault, 1976) to give shape to post-industrial urban symbolic economy and a broader strategy of urban regeneration, has been highlighted for a long time (Lash and Urry, 1994; Zukin, 1995, 2010; Bobbio and Guala, 2002). In fact, mega-events are rhetorically presented as an opportunity for greater worldwide visibility that can add value to what local territories can offer to tourists (Kang and Perdue, 1994; Zukin, 2004), in a medium-term process characterized by a paradigmatic change from urban managerialism to urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989). In particular, as Casaglia (2016: 5) notes, they can 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”, as happened in the case of Expo 2015.

Whilst the use of mega-events by right-wing mayors and administrations has been analysed in a post-capitalist perspective (Casaglia, 2016), it is correct to add that these events are currently promoted both by right and left wing coalitions in a more general post-political frame (Swyngedouw, 2007; Peck, 2012; Bertuzzi, forthcoming). This was particularly true for Expo 2015, where the candidacy and the first years of organization were sustained by a right-wing mayor, while the preparation works and the event itself happened under a left-wing administration.

In such situations, urban spaces nowadays take on new significance as protest venues for meetings and performances and sponsor new social and political realities (Sassen, 2011) where it is possible to re-build existences not besieged by economic and political power (Lefebvre, 1996). Such an assumption more generally reflects the importance played by the role of political and discursive opportunity structure in the actions and frames of social movements (Martínez, 2007; Arampatzi and Nicholls, 2012). This is relevant, for example, in the construction and maintenance of alliances with other actors in civil society (Diani, 2015; Biorcio and Vitale, 2016; Casaglia, 2016) and in a transnational dimension (Diani and McAdam, 2003; Bennett, 2005; Vitale, 2007; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Pleyers, 2011;

Mayer, 2013), and currently results in an “attempt to create a broader social consensus in opposition to the neoliberal order that combines radical struggle with grassroots initiatives for alternative models” (Casaglia, 2016: 6).

## 2.2. Frame Analysis in Social Movement Studies

As introduced in the previous paragraph, the background where alternative and contentious discourses emerge needs to be considered (Tarrow, 1989; Koopmans and Olzak, 2004; Bröer and Duyvendak, 2009) in order to better understand how social movements build counter-narratives (Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011; De Graaf, Dimitriu and Ringsmose, 2015) or how they use existing ones to propose alternative scenarios (Snow and Byrd, 2007), to create new ‘codes’ (Melucci, 1996) and to challenge dominant frames.

To introduce the role of frame analysis in social movement studies (Melucci, 1984; Snow and Benford, 1988; Fligstein and McAdam, 2011, 2012; Lindekilde, 2014), it is important to stress how the approaches historically dominating this field – resource mobilization, political opportunity structure, new social movements – work mainly as ideal types, often leaving space for contaminations and consolidation into a single scheme (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, 1996). Specifically, the concept of ‘frame’ (Bateson, 1955; Goffman, 1974) has been used in this way. Discourse and frame analysis developed precisely from the limits of the resource mobilization approach: following the ‘linguistic turn’ affecting social sciences in the 1970s, social movement scholars increasingly emphasized the role of ideology, not just focusing on the cost/benefit ratio and on the activities of ‘social movement entrepreneurs.’ This turn would later have become central in the analysis of new social movements theorists. Given the focus on frames and discourses, these two approaches found a connection, as underscored by Lindekilde (2014: 196): “ideas, cultures and ideology are used, interpreted, and spliced together with certain situations or empirical phenomena in order to construct ideational patterns through which the world is understood, and which can be used to mobilize support.”

Additionally, as the geographical base of the movements grew over the past decades, so did the number of issues to deal with, resulting in protest actions that have simultaneously involved peace movements, women’s rights movements, environmental movements, ethical finance movements, and so on. Such a wide variety of collective actors is well suited to the definition of ‘master frame’ (Snow and Benford, 1992), one that is able to bridge, amplify, extend or transform (in a word, ‘align’: Snow *et al.*, 1986) different frames (Tremayne, 2014). If the concept of ‘master frame’ was proposed in reference to transnational movements and in particular to the global

justice movement (della Porta, 2007), it is thus correct to clarify two aspects. Whereas on the one hand, the same concept might well refer to local protests (Ihlen and Nitz, 2008; Clayes, 2015), on the other hand, it seems dubious to talk about current global movements in light of the partial failure of the global justice movement and the nature of the majority of contemporary social movements (15-M, Occupy, Arab springs, and so on) which often (partially) returned to a national scale (della Porta and Mattoni, 2014).

Finally, when analysing the frames proposed by collective actors, a central role is assumed by the so-called political opportunity structures (Eisinger, 1973; Kitschelt, 1986; Tarrow, 1989), that can help (or, to the contrary, hinder) the emergence of contentious perspectives, codes and ideas. In this regard, some authors have proposed the concept of a ‘discursive opportunity structure’ (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004; McCammon *et al.*, 2007) to underline how the construction of an alternative imaginary needs to be framed in relation to dominant discursive practices and broader contexts.

### **2.3. Discursive Opportunity Structures and the No Expo Network**

The specific ‘discursive opportunity structure’ in which the coalition developed its arguments and actions merits brief mention. At least two elements must be remembered: the threat to security posed by the No Expo Network during the months prior to the event; and the various scandals that accompanied the preparatory works (see Barbacetto and Maroni, 2015; Moccia, 2015). As for the latter, it is correct to point out that although the dominant public discourse was particularly favourable to Expo 2015, some voices (including institutional ones) diverged from the mainstream propaganda, with critiques mainly focused on the financial cost of the event, and especially those caught taking bribes, which led to numerous arrests.

As for the security concerns, mention should be made of significant episodes in 2015, related to prominent protests in 21st century Italy: the No Tav Movement, the mass participation at the European Social Forum in Florence (2002) and the anti-G8 summit protests in Genoa (2001). This last event is particularly well inscribed in the collective memory because of the protesters’ fervour, the centrality assumed by the so-called Black Block, and the violent police response. The Italian Secret Services evoked the G8 summit in Genoa to demonstrate the dangerousness of the No Expo protest, and already in January 2015 they referred to Expo 2015 as an event “ten times more dangerous than the G8 in Genoa.” The national newspapers published statements along the same lines as the warning. *La Repubblica*, for example, (22 January 2015) wrote: “On May 1<sup>st</sup>, with the opening of Expo, Milan will be the showcase of the world. But there is someone who

is preparing to crush this showcase,” and *Secolo XIX* (22 January 2015) ran the headline, “With Expo, the ultra-left will hit worse than Genoa.” Another example of this atmosphere of ‘witch hunting’ was the closing of the University of Milan in January 2015, an action which sought to avoid a possible occupation of the campus and to prevent a No Expo assembly. Given the way this episode unfolded and the actual ‘danger’ of a possible occupation, it seems arguably undemocratic that a venue such as a public university would be barred from hosting a public assembly.

In the end, the real turning point was marked by the aforementioned demonstration that took place in Milan on 1 May 2015. The critics coming from the No Expo Network – who had already been downplayed by mainstream media before the beginning of the event and relegated only to some ‘niches’ of organized protest – were now totally obscured by the media campaign that followed the No Expo May Day.

To contrast this propaganda, the No Expo Network tried to re-frame the main discourses proposed by the organizers of the Universal Exposition, in order to offer a specific counter-imaginary, as will be discussed in the section dedicated to fieldwork.

### **3. Fieldwork**

Data sources for the present research include an analysis of the main files available on the website [www.noexpo.org](http://www.noexpo.org), eight semi-structured interviews (Flick, 1998; della Porta, 2010) conducted with activists of social movements, and the author’s participation in some of the main actions and protests carried out by the No Expo Network.

Before presenting the results derived from the interviews and frame analysis, the internal differentiation of the Network will be briefly reconstructed.

#### **3.1. The Internal Composition of the No Expo Network**

The main characteristic of the No Expo Network, from the initiative’s beginning and increasingly so over time, was the diverse nature of its internal composition, quite typical of social movements of the last 15 years. This multiplicity of voices allowed for the development of a pluralistic critique against Expo, highlighting the event’s various contradictions.

To try to map the breadth of diversity within the No Expo Network is a difficult task because of the very nature of this universe, comprising not only groups and grassroots organizations defending a wide range of issues and denouncing specific aspects of the mega-event, but also various individual and collective subjectivities.

Alternating periods of visibility and inactivity marked the nearly 8-year period of mobilization (Melucci, 1984), with some key moments being the No Expo Festival (May 2010), the No Expo Climate Camp (June 2012), and another major demonstration, on par with that of May 2010, in October 2014. In addition to these occurrences, and more generally to the forms of action and communication meant to challenge the Exposition (see, for example, the massive critical-mass in Monza in 2013; the virtual and real game 'Expopolis' performed in the city; numerous campaigns and demonstrations of students, temporary workers and LGBTQI groups), it is vital to mention the participation of the No Expo Network in other important social struggles of recent years, from the initiative against the High Speed Railway TAV (Treno Alta Velocità) to the No Canal campaign.

I think the best way to understand the No Expo Network is to focus our attention on those initiatives which offered rhythm and effective public visibility: the critical mass in Monza (7 July 2013) which arrived just in front of Villa Reale, one of the official representative headquarters of Expo and officially within the perimeter of the red line; moreover, we produced the game Expopolis, based on Monopoly, and we performed it in many squares... anyone can download, reproduce and personalize it, according to local struggles against land-grabbing and the context where they want to play. In addition, we can consider also some important campaigns like No Canal and the student's campaign against voluntary work. All of these events were the best communication actions of the Network, and the website can give you only a partial and reductive feedback of these activities. (Interview 1, A. D., author's translation)

Trying, however, to make sense of this 'archipelago' (Diani, 1988), and to answer our first research question (*RQ 1: Who were the central actors of the No Expo Network?*), we can argue that the two main areas of the No Expo Network were the most important CSOAs of Milan and groups of students, especially university students, but also high school students. Added to these two areas are those movements which had previously mobilized against certain major infrastructures (No Tav, No Muos, No Mose and No Canal), groups sustaining specific campaigns in opposition to Expo ('Io non lavoro gratis per Expo', 'Io non studio gratis per Expo', 'No Expo Pride', 'Liberati da Expo'), housing rights groups (Ira C, Abitare nella crisi, Off Topic, and so on), and already existing groups affiliated with events (EuroMayDay), spaces (Ri-Make), the common good (Acqua bene comune), work (Ri-Maflow) and trade unions (CUB, USB and Slai Cobas). Finally, some local and also international groups participated in initiatives promoted by the Network over the years.

Proposing a real analysis of the degree of centrality of different groups goes beyond the scope of the present article. Later research will focus on a diachronical perspective, pointing to the leading role of the CSOAs that emerged, especially from 2012 onward, (Casaglia, 2016), as will be discussed with specific reference to the frame analysis and the theme of the ‘right to the city.’

### 3.2. Frame Analysis

With respect to the frame analysis, and in response to the second research question (*RQ 2: What were the main arguments, strategies and rhetoric of the No Expo Network?*) the first phase identified the main documents produced by the No Expo Network, specifically five lengthy files available on [www.noexpo.org](http://www.noexpo.org) (Exit Expo;<sup>1</sup> Nessuna faccia buona, pulita e giusta a Expo 2015;<sup>2</sup> Behind Expo;<sup>3</sup> Expopolis;<sup>4</sup> Tangenti, debito, cemento e precarietà tra Milano e Mantova).<sup>5</sup> It is important to clarify here that a web content frame analysis is not proposed, but a ‘simple’ frame analysis of documents found on the Internet but also available in print. These documents were the only ones available on the website at the beginning of the event, and so the assumption is that these were the only ones truly shared by all the components of the Network. There were several other documents proposed by individual groups, but their exclusion (or later inclusion) on the website justifies the decision to not consider them.

After the identification of the material to be analyzed, a careful examination of these files revealed that their main dimensions produced a schematic grid, which was next integrated via NVivo software to complete the codebook. The analysis then extracted single nodes and greater macro frames. What emerged was a wide set of issues, from governance to risk, from development to debt, and so on. To summarize and offer the clearest picture possible within such a broad scope of actors and themes, three macro frames can be labeled as follows: 1) mega-events, power and the right to the city; 2) bio-politics; 3) rhetoric and the construction of imaginaries. It is worth noting that these three macro frames have also been substantially

<sup>1</sup> Accessed on 04.05.2015, at <http://www.offtopiclab.org/e-arrivato-il-dossier-noexpo/>.

<sup>2</sup> Accessed on 04.05.2015, at [https://antispefa.noblogs.org/files/2014/07/nessuna-faccia-buona-pulita-giusta-a-expo-2015\\_2014.pdf](https://antispefa.noblogs.org/files/2014/07/nessuna-faccia-buona-pulita-giusta-a-expo-2015_2014.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Accessed on 04.05.2015, at <http://www.milanoimovimento.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/EXPO-ATTRAVERSO-I-BRAND.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Accessed on 04.05.2015, at <http://www.offtopiclab.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/expopolis.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Accessed on 04.05.2015, at <https://equalmn.wordpress.com/2014/09/19/dossier-expo-2015-mantova/>.

confirmed in the majority of the interviews conducted (see Table 1). In the semi-structured interviews, other aspects were also investigated, such as the origin of groups and activists, the use of different practices and forms of protest, or the level of ‘tolerance’ towards violent actions. However, we also tried to detect the opposition’s main arguments proposed by individual SMOs and by the general coalition.

**TABLE 1 – Main Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Interviewed Activists**

<b>Gender</b>	Male	6
	Female	2
<b>Year of birth</b>	Before 1970	2
	1970-1980	3
	After 1980	3
<b>Occupation</b>	Employed	4
	Student	3
	Retired	1

Source: research on the No Expo Network

This article will only focus on the first macro frame (mega-events, power, and the right to the city) given the centrality it assumed over the years of mobilization. Before undertaking this analysis, a brief consideration of other issues must be made. In the ‘bio-politics’ macro frame, aspects related to job insecurity (and ‘free’, unpaid jobs in particular), commodification, and the treatment of the LGBTQI community were coded, as well as anthropocentrism, exploitation of the environment and serious health risks for humankind. This macro frame is clearly very broad; the desired emphasis, however, lies precisely in the great number of issues characterizing the No Expo Network, which on the one hand represented its peculiarity and its potential strength, whilst on the other hand meant having to hold together all of the Network’s areas. The third macro frame (and beyond the scope of the present paper) is entitled ‘rhetoric and the construction of imaginaries,’ built around the identification of specific marketing devices used by Expo 2015, in particular the greenwashing and pinkwashing operations aimed at presenting the event as a brand with an important message (feeding the planet, energy for life) and discounting its real critical aspects, in order to build a positive imaginary which the populace could identify with.

Following the brief mention of these two macro frames and before addressing ‘mega-events, power and the right to the city’, two typical aspects of frame analysis should be outlined: the diagnosis vs. prognosis dialectic (Snow and Benford, 1988) and the identification of a master frame (Snow and Benford, 1992). From the analysis of the five main files, a radical prevalence of the diagnostic dimension emerged. If this is due to the nature of a file, specifically aimed at deconstruction, the percentages of such asymmetry generate a certain impression: the space occupied by prognosis is just 12.49%, whereas diagnosis and motivation represent the remaining 87.51%. As for the master frame, this was identified within a general critique of capitalism in its various components: this is certainly not a novelty, and it represents the classic master frame of large contemporary contentious coalitions rather well, being the typical example of what Chesters and Welsh (2006) call ‘plateau,’ namely the space where anarchic, liberal, socialist, libertarian, feminist, anti-racial, and anti-imperialistic critical perspectives co-exist around the pursuit of immediate and long terms objectives.

Our discourse was totally political, and the mega-event obviously requires quite a radical critique on which to focus your engagement, exactly because it’s an international event, because it involved multinational corporations from all over the world, because it’s a symbolic event of capitalism, of a certain capitalist rhetoric that always tries to present itself in new ways, with new images, and tries to adapt to the new times in a very hypocritical way. (Interview 7, L. C., author’s translation)

### **3.3. Mega-events, Power and the Right to the City**

In their diagnosis on this macro frame, the No Expo files showed the hegemonic discourse powered by Expo 2015, simultaneously proposing a counter-discourse, not always explicitly described but clearly emerging between the lines. Under this macro frame the following nodes were collected: over-building (‘cementificazione’ in Italian), mega-events, past vs. future, resources, public vs. private space, development, governance, services.

Harnessing a more qualitative approach, the focus now turns to the main aspects detected, very often finding a punctual reference in urban sociology literature and especially in the detection of urban regimes strategies adopted to revitalize the symbolic imaginary of modern cities. For example, criteria for assigning an event like Expo are described as strictly connected to what a city can offer as a capitalistic machine (Baumol, 2002). In this sense, with an operation of frame bridging, the No Expo files underscored how offering

a great number of ‘volunteer workers’ was a vantage point for Milan’s candidacy to host the event.

The special commissioner Giuseppe Sala signed contracts with some ‘partners’, namely actors who will be given spaces and visibility, in return for economic exchanges, for the sales of admission tickets, and for the collaboration in the recruitment of volunteer workers – among which we can mention Slow Food, Coop and Eataly. (“Nessuna faccia buona, pulita e giusta a Expo 2015”, pages 16-17, author’s translation)<sup>6</sup>

If urban spaces are the privileged target for capital investments, it is quite uncertain whether any positive repercussions for local territories and their inhabitants may result, unfortunately. This is precisely what the No Expo Network tried to argue by pointing out the broad processes of gentrification, and more generally, of the distortion of the urban landscape (especially in suburban areas), involving public and private actors, characterized by several episodes of corruption. Nevertheless, this was not at the crux of the criticism aimed at the Universal Exposition, which, in the No Expo discourse, was criticized at its roots for the idea of development it proposed and for the sponsors representing multinational corporations. However, in the pages of the files and in the interviews conducted, a substantial space is also dedicated to specific judicial investigations reporting the involvement of some major construction companies (CMC, Impregilo, Euromilano, and so on). This aspect is also connected to local governance, in a diachronic analysis from the former administration (led by Mrs Letizia Moratti) to the following one (led by Mr Giuliano Pisapia): the transversal critique against the different mayors and administrations seeks to highlight the presence of post-political discourses and perspectives of local governments, that (according to the No Expo Network rhetoric) would be more interested in the pursuit of private interests than in the realization of the public good.

In the same way, the nature of mega-events as a ‘dispositif’ (Foucault, 1976) to shape the postindustrial urban symbolic economy (Lash and Urry, 1994; Zukin, 1995, 2010; Bobbio and Guala, 2002) was highlighted. In the empirical materials, in-depth descriptions of previous Universal Expositions were found in order to describe how they were used to radically change the conformation of cities in a hyper-capitalist direction. From the No Expo diagnosis it emerged how cultural production and consumption

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<sup>6</sup> Farro & Fuoco – Alimenta il conflitto (2014), “Nessuna faccia buona, pulita e giusta a Expo 2015”. Accessed on 04.05.2015, at [https://antispefa.noblogs.org/files/2014/07/nessuna-faccia-buona-pulita-giusta-a-expo-2015\\_2014.pdf](https://antispefa.noblogs.org/files/2014/07/nessuna-faccia-buona-pulita-giusta-a-expo-2015_2014.pdf).

are becoming increasingly strategic devices for reshaping the city as the privileged place for leisure and tourism, and for restructuring the economy and the identity of large and medium-sized urban areas involved in global economic competition.

As already anticipated, the files as well as the interviews revealed the remarkable importance of diagnosis as opposed to prognosis. However, some examples of good practices and alternatives were proposed. The experience of the No Expo Climate Camp is a prime example, often identified as an alternative model of development and as a different approach to imagine the future of the city. In addition, other important episodes and struggles merit attention, and in particular the alliance with the No Canal Campaign, which surely represented one of the main successes of the entire No Expo Network activity (Casaglia, 2016).

We believe in a city where the right to housing prevails over incomes, where spaces of socialization and environmental-friendly spaces are preferred to grey skyscrapers, where slow and sustainable mobility prevails over useless infrastructures and shopping malls, putting a new model of metropolitan welfare before the interests of construction companies and banks. Leaving Expo means saving agricultural areas from mines, construction yards, organized crime and absurd virtual greenhouses. This is our proposal that supports our “no”, the immobility is created by those who continue to pursue anti-economic and damaging policies, not by those who oppose them. (Exit Expo, page 57, author’s translation)<sup>7</sup>

To conclude the discussion of ‘mega-events, power and the right to the city’, it is fitting to add the following final note. In recent months, Milan was at the centre of several episodes, some violent, that saw not only social activists but also ‘common citizens’ opposing police forces and protesting the occupation of buildings, especially in certain suburban areas (Giambellino, Corvetto, San Siro, and so on). The ‘showcase city,’ as Milan was labelled on the occasion of the Universal Exposition, appears unable to adequately accommodate some of its residents, and the process of gentrification and obsessive construction denounced by the No Expo Network seemed to have increased the problem. It is clear that the issue extends beyond the scope of the mega-event, but it is equally evident that the model of the city developed and proposed by such event has been the detonator of an already sufficiently problematic situation.

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<sup>7</sup> Off Topic (2012), “Exit Expo”. Accessed on 04.05.2015, at <http://abo.gnumerica.org/dossier%20noexpo.pdf>.

### 3.4. The Hidden Frame

The previous paragraph focused on the most important frame in the No Expo Network propaganda, namely the one related to power and the right to the city. The strong insistence on this point emerged especially after 2012, when some Milanese CSOAs took a leading position among the general coalition and a new phase of mobilization began, defined by the same activists as the No Expo Attitude (Casaglia, 2016). From this moment onward, taking a central position were specific issues related to urban governance and the critiques against large infrastructures, well represented by the strong connections with No Canal campaign and No Tav movement.

At the same time, some other frames were somehow hidden, or at least partially silenced. This is the case, for example, of the specific theme of this edition of the Universal Exposition, that is to say, 'food'. On the one hand, this omission could be viewed as a silencing strategy adopted by organizers, given the obvious contradictions that the main sponsors (Coca Cola, McDonald's, and others) might have with the event's official message, which was to reduce waste and hunger in the world as well as to decelerate the gospel of economic development or, at least, to promote a more effective use of natural resources. On the other hand, the No Expo Network decided not to concentrate its critiques on the theme of the event, preferring other battlegrounds. Those (few) voices that have addressed the issue more in depth were those in support of organic and local products, and especially anti-speciesism, represented by some important anti-capitalist animal rights organizations and groups located in Milan. On the one hand, it was reported that greenwashing operations were carried out by some multinational companies in order to simulate an interest in the preservation of natural heritage (and, therefore, in a more equal redistribution of food resources); on the other hand, it was emphasized that the fact of eating meat, criticized for ethical reasons, would also represent the leading cause of food scarcity in the world, and that the adoption of a vegan diet could lead to improvements not only for animal rights but also for the conditions of people living in the poorest regions of the planet.

Expo, like all the large fairs, is based on the slaughter of billions of animals... it's an event that is symbolically important for the cleaning-up of the image of different subjects related to capitalism and neo-liberalism: as the bodies of animals are one of the driving forces for the functioning of capitalism, I think it's also important that those who are interested in those bodies should be particularly vigilant to such event. (Interview 4, M. R., author's translation)

Such arguments, ones that certainly would have provided very strong points against multinational corporations within the food industry, clashed with

lifestyles and consumption habits rooted not only in the general population but also among the same activists of the No Expo Network, which thus seemed to have voluntarily mitigated the scope and visibility of these critical points.

As previously explained, in fact, the No Expo Network was characterized by its variegated internal composition, different organizational and contentious paths, and a multiplicity of subjectivities and issues: all these aspects are unavoidable when examining which issues and which frames took a central position in the construction of alternative discourses.

## **Conclusion**

This paper focused on the theme of the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre, 1996). This is due to the growing role assumed over the years by the local CSOAs, which were able to frame the main protest actions and the coalition discourse around the contrast to neo-liberal governance of contemporary Western cities, also bridging their arguments with those expressed by other actors belonging to civil society and trying to connect the local struggle to more general critiques already proposed by other social movements during previous mega-events and particularly Universal Expositions. Also analysed were the rhetoric and actions proposed by the No Expo Network looking at the more general surrounding situation and discursive opportunity structures in which they developed.

It must be said that, especially after 1 May 2015, the No Expo Network and the No Expo arguments seemed to have disappeared from the public discourse, as if the Network were no longer able to manage its communication activity after that episode. Of course, it was not easy to resist the tsunami of public outrage, but the coalition showed signs of limited effectiveness in dealing with the defamation. At the same time it should be considered that the two contenders in the field (reference here to Expo 2015 and the No Expo Network) departed from positions too unbalanced to guarantee a real comparison. On the one side was a team of communication professionals, experts in marketing campaigns, with considerable disposable income and the most sophisticated equipment, whose task was to convey a positive and absolutely ecumenical message of hope, pitted against volunteer activists with economic resources far more limited and mainly dependent on self-funding, who had to structure a complex and conflicting discourse.

In this sense, the No Expo Network is quite deserving of recognition given how consistently well it conducted its actions and protests. As previously pointed out, the coalition enjoyed considerable internal diversity, as its elements hailed from very different areas. Within such differentiation, the persistent and shared opposition to neo-liberal politics and urban regimes perspectives represented

a fixed point for all of the actors involved. This resulted in the refusal to use more institutional supports and to mitigate contention also when collaborating with other agents within civil society. If certain scholars feared an automatic institutionalization of social movements when they approached other collective subjects and tried to obtain wider visibility (Crouch, 2000), this does not seem to be a probable destiny, which can also be proven by the present case study, for example by looking at the positive effects of the alliance between the No Canal campaign and No Expo Network, which did not result in failed institutionalization (Mudu, 2012).

On the contrary, looking at the overall effectiveness of the No Expo Network in mobilizing broad sectors of public opinion one might surely label it as a ‘failed mobilization’ (Zamponi, 2012), with respect to how the populace failed to appreciate the realization of the event and how the public’s general perception of the event was not swayed. In effect, the No Expo Network’s contrast to the rhetoric of urban regimes revitalization proved to be ineffective, as the special commissioner of Expo 2015, Giuseppe Sala, was nominated as mayor of Milan by a centre-left coalition and became mayor of the city in June 2016 (Bertuzzi, forthcoming). This fact notwithstanding, and to entertain a more general reflection, such a failure to break into the so-called public debate should not be viewed as a grave fault, at least not in a medium-long term, which is the most appropriate time frame to judge contentious movements seeking to change existing neoliberal perspectives and politics. In conclusion, given the No Expo Network’s variegated composition and its specific nature as an enterprise not only focused around the mega-event but more generally interested in a specific idea of the ‘right to the city’, it is important to stress that the real goals and also the real extent of the initiative did not come to an end when the Expo gates closed, as it will continue as a workshop for pursuing different ideas about the future and about development.

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**Regimes urbanos e o direito à cidade: uma análise da No Expo Network e do seu enquadramento protestatário**

Em Milão, o ano de 2015 significou a chegada da Expo. Apresentada à opinião pública como uma oportunidade para o renascimento de Itália e com um grande investimento em recursos económicos e simbólicos, praticamente não deu qualquer margem para pontos de vista críticos. Ainda assim, houve muitos grupos que se reuniram em torno da No Expo Network, criando uma coligação de contestação que se opunha ao evento de 2015 e, mais genericamente, à ideia de desenvolvimento proposta por tais mega-acontecimentos. Este artigo analisa a natureza dos regimes urbanos contemporâneos e o papel das estruturas de conjuntura discursiva e política na estruturação dos movimentos sociais. Através de entrevistas semiestruturadas, da análise do enquadramento e da participação em protestos e outros eventos similares, procedeu-se ao mapeamento da composição interna da No Expo Network, e analisaram-se os seus principais argumentos e retórica de oposição, focando principalmente o tema do ‘direito à cidade’.

**Palavras-chave:** direito à cidade; Expo; Itália; megaeventos; movimentos sociais; redes sociais.

**Régimes urbains et le Droit à la Ville: une analyse de la No Expo Network et de son encadrement protestataire**

À Milan, l’année 2015 fut celle de l’arrivée de l’Expo. Présentée au public comme une chance pour la reprise de l’Italie et comme un grand investissement en ressources économiques et symboliques, elle n’a pratiquement pas donné la moindre marge à des points de vue critiques. Malgré tout, des groupes se réunirent autour de la No Expo Network et créèrent une coalition de contestation qui s’opposait à l’évènement de 2015 et, plus globalement, à l’idée de développement proposée par de tels méga-événements. Cet article se penche sur la nature des régimes urbains contemporains et sur le rôle des structures de conjuncture discursive et politique dans la structuration de mouvements sociaux.

Par le truchement d’entretiens semi-structurés, d’analyse de l’encadrement et de la participation à des protestations/manifestations et autres évènements semblables, nous avons dressé un mappage de la composition interne de la No Expo Network, et nous avons étudié ses principaux arguments et rhétorique d’opposition, en focalisant principalement le thème du ‘droit à la ville’.

**Mots-clés:** droit à la ville; Expo; Italie; méga-événements; mouvements sociaux; réseaux sociaux.

