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## **The emerging civil society. Governing through leisure activism in Milan**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the emerging forms of civil society in the NoLo area of Milan that have acquired political relevance by deploying a combination of leisure and activism. The heterogeneous set of initiatives and events that, using the NoLo label, animate the urban space of the same name have two distinct traits: firstly, they exert a subtle political action which is played out at a cultural level, in particular in their ability to draw on and influence common sense and taken-for-granted perceptions; and secondly, the chosen initiatives effectively activate heavy involvement in local public policy-making processes, in line with the neoliberal governance of the city and the authorities' promise to govern not just for the citizens but with them. The case study provides an empirical illustration of an emerging urban civil society, with specific attention on its functioning, how certain situated events were set up and unfolded, and two specific episodes of involvement in the local policy-making process. The proposed research findings - including the exclusionary/inclusive pattern that shapes citizens' involvement, the consensus-building strategy enacted by the studied civil society and the increasing political relevance of bottom-up urban initiatives - illustrate the meaning of governing through leisure activism in Milan.

### **Introduction: The Emerging Civil Society, Leisure Activism and Urban Government.**

The increasing relevance of festivals, public performances and other cultural events promoted by civil society actors has attracted widespread attention from scholars of urbanism and leisure (Sampson 2012, p. 179; Citroni 2020). Indeed, such initiatives animate and reshape public spaces in ways that call into question the most well-trodden arguments on urban changes, protest and creativity (Grigoleit et al., 2013). In particular, current convivial and cultural initiatives – such as neighbourhood parties (Morelli, 2019) or graffiti (Brighenti, 2010) – are highly relevant in shaping major processes of urban change, such as gentrification (Zukin, 2010; Brown-Saracino, 2009).

The connection between protest and leisure has an emerging history (Gilchrist & Ravenscroft, 2013; Lamond, 2018; Lamond & Spracklen, 2015), drawing on events and the animation of

public spaces to express dissent and put forward collective actions in a variety of urban contexts. This process gained further momentum with the advent of the so-called “new social movements, with their spectacular events and other ephemeral, highly symbolic, practices that challenged the dominant codes of action and discourse” (Citroni, 2020: 5).

Nowadays, urban events have regained a central role in contemporary public space, by establishing a different connection with collective action and politics. Indeed, the current growth of events animating urban spaces combines forms of action that fall into categories that in the recent history of protest through arts and leisure were traditionally separated: political activism and for-profit events (Lamond, 2018); mainstream urban development and movements embodying a radical critique of it (McLean, 2014); urban diversity and the subtle exertion of power over its definition (Tissot, 2014); the temporary use of public space as a platform for alternative cultures and practices and their appropriation by mainstream urban processes (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2017).

Based on participant observation of events and situations, a set of in-depth interviews with relevant actors and the critical analysis of media and digital sources, this paper addresses the case of what we define as “NoLo as a civil society” (hereafter, NCS) The label NoLo refers to a small area of Milan where in recent years new forms of neighborhood-based forms of urban activism, have arisen. We argue that this case offers a particularly striking combination of leisure and politics: an emerging form of urban civil society that draws widely on convivial events, initially aimed at enhancing the local quality of life and eventually coming to enjoy increasing political relevance. In a nutshell, in the selected case study, leisure activism does not refer to the use of events and leisure practices to protest, but rather to their political use within the local governance framework.

Indeed, our analysis of NCS shows how its political relevance corresponds to the expansion and stabilisation of governing through civil society typical of neoliberal societies (Foucault, 2005; Brighenti, 2016; Coppola, 2018) and allows us to further explore this argument that, while widely discussed in theoretical terms, appears to have been seldom addressed empirically. More specifically, we argue that NCS represents a case of animation of urban spaces through an emerging combination of leisure and activism that resonates distinctively with the Gramscian concept of subtle political action, a kind of action that is played out at a

cultural level (Citroni, 2019), in particular in its ability to influence common sense and taken-for-granted perceptions (Gramsci, 1975). Based on this assumption, we addressed the case study with questions such as: how does this specific and situated form of urban government through leisure-oriented civil society actually work? What are its main conditions of possibility and the concrete devices through which it is actually produced on the ground by combining leisure, conviviality and activism? And what are mechanisms and processes of inclusion and exclusion that ultimately make it possible?

The paper is organised as follows: we first introduce the case study, paying particular attention to the ways it defines belonging by enforcing strategies of “exclusion/inclusion” (Citroni, 2015); second, we focus on two specific public policy processes in which NCS played a significant role, in order to investigate the relationship of this civil society with policy-making processes and local politics.

### **The Context: NoLo as Civil Society (NCS)**

The name “NoLo” stems from its geographical location *North of Piazzale Loreto*, in north-east Milan. NoLo now appears both on Google Maps and in the city’s planning documents, as the city council voted in March 2019 to change the area’s designation from “Loreto” to the new name “Loreto-Casoretto-NoLo”. This move was the outcome of a longer-term campaign launched in 2015, when a group of Milanese creatives coined the acronym “for fun” (Coppola, 2019). Rapidly, news coverage started to associate the new brand with signs of “urban regeneration” of an area traditionally represented through negative discourses (Sironi, 2016). In particular, the NoLo narrative reversed the territorial stigma attached to two adjacent neighbourhoods: the area around the central station, with its concentration of homeless shelters and petty crime; and the Via Padova area, a neighbourhood with a large migrant population that in the recent past has recurrently been associated with violence and urban insecurity issues in mainstream national media reports (Verga, 2016).

Besides its strategic role in spreading a “positive” narrative about the area, more significantly the NoLo label started to be used as a prefix or suffix in the naming of a variety of new urban initiatives, events and social network pages related to the area. These included, to name but

a few: the *Nolo Fringe Festival*, which features live shows and performing arts; *Biennolo*, which organises contemporary art shows in a variety of local spaces; *RadioNolo*, a local internet radio station that, apart from broadcasting, also incorporates a variety of initiatives such as *Sannolo*, a neighbourhood music festival; *NoLo Social District*, a Facebook group, currently with over 9,000 participants, that allows neighbours to contact one another and organise a variety of events to animate local public spaces, such as the open-air Saturday morning breakfast, often through specific Facebook sub-pages; *Qulo* (a variant on the Italian word for “arse”), another Facebook page which publicly contends that the NoLo brand contributes to the area’s gentrification; and *Occupy Nolo*, a protest event, including dancing activists, that took place on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2019 in NoLo's main square and aimed to draw attention to the risk of gentrification.

This heterogeneous set of initiatives together forms NCS: an open field of social formations, subjectivities and relationships that mobilise the NoLo label to animate the local urban space. What qualifies this field as civil society is not the contents of the initiatives it includes or the motivations of those who organise them (Biorcio and Vitale, 2016). Instead, NCS is here intended as civil society in the most familiar sense of the expression, in other words the public or potentially public settings in which uncoerced participants engage in ongoing, voluntary associations, outside of the immediate demands of family, work, or government (Walzer, 1992). Liberal political thinking has defined civil society as a sphere of groups carrying out actions outside institutional politics and its formal procedures but nevertheless affecting institutionalised politics (Habermas, 2000). Although this kind of consequence may appear distant from the meanings attached to the aforementioned initiatives by those who set them up, they nevertheless do produce relevant political implications. Before focusing on such implications, and in order to better grasp their essential conditions of possibility, we must first specify how NCS and its initiatives are structured.

### **Civil Society Events and their Exclusionary/Inclusive Pattern**

A relatively easy entry point to NCS is NoLo Social District (NSD), a Facebook page that acts as the main organising device and reference point for most of the above-mentioned initiatives. NSD, according to the introduction on the page:

is an extended social street, a group whose goal is to create connections among people who live in NoLo (North Loreto) and want to get to know and help each other: sharing what is going on in the neighbourhood, exchanging advice on services and shops, and launching neighbourhood initiatives.

As is common in the statutes of non-profit associations and other civil society groups, NSD's self-description makes clear its nature as a non-political and non-partisan project, as "the group is not associated with either political parties or businesses, and is independent". In particular, its aim to "contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of those who live in the neighbourhood" marks NSD out as universally oriented, pursuing goals that are so broadly defined they are difficult to either contest or criticise. However, there are some limits to this inclusivity, as while the group is "open to all neighbours", the guidelines clarify that "racist, offensive and intolerant comments are not allowed". The combination of inclusion and exclusion is particularly striking for readers when seen within a single sentence, such as the following: "NoLo Social District is a space of free speech: political, religious and ideological propaganda in any form is not permitted". If this understanding of free speech appears universal and not partisan to the reader, it is probably because he/she shares the same viewpoint.

The many thematic sub-pages associated with the main one, each of them devoted to a specific matter, topic or public, epitomise the concrete articulation of NCS's activities and events: "environmental sustainability" for *Nolo Plastic Free*; swapping second-hand clothes for *Nolo mercatino dell'usato*; children's activities for *Nolo for Kids* and activities for cat-lovers for *Nolo Cats*; and reading together and sharing recommendations for *Nolo Lettura*. Similar to that which emerges in NSD's self-description, the sub-groups also appear universally oriented, pursuing goals and carrying out activities that are difficult to disapprove of or criticise. These activities comprise leisure practices that are similar to most of NCS's initiatives, such as enjoying the music of *Sannolo* or the fringe culture shows of *Nolo Fringe Festival*, spending time in the local night spots or learning about local history in the *GiroNolo* neighbourhood tours. We are not denying the potential "politicalness" of meanings attached to such initiatives by those setting them up or participating in them. On the contrary, there are reasons to believe that – as clearly outlined with respect to environmental activism (Lichterman, 1996) – involvement in NCS is associated, in participants' actual experience, with

both self-expressive and political motives: for example, swapping second-hand clothes at open-air markets is also done with the aim of emptying wardrobes and combatting consumerism, while at the same time being an enjoyable practice directed towards animating and improving the neighbourhood.

Though such instances coexist, their combination in NCS follows a specific pattern that is typical of urban events (Citroni, 2020) and is crucial to account for the rapid growth and political relevance of this local civil society. It is a double pattern which, on the one hand, portrays NCS events as inclusive, associated to concerns that enjoy wide consensus within the new urban middle classes (such as environmental sustainability) and translated into convivial activities that are difficult to criticise in themselves. On the other hand, while reproducing a given discursive order, the NCS events also produce a new order with respect to the local scale to which they refer and which inevitably includes partial versions of the general issues. Only by moving from the events' official communication to an in-depth analysis of their situated taking place can one grasp this discursive order and the subtle ways in which it conveys its messages, thus reinforcing its inevitably exclusionary boundaries. Seemingly trivial, local urban events promote general values (e.g. sociability, public space and sustainability) while enjoying, as both a condition of the development of such events and their outcome, the possibility to control the situated meanings of these values. This was made clear, for example, by Sylvie Tissot (2014) with respect to civic associations that promoted urban diversity in a local area of Boston through events – such as guided tours – that “controlled” the local meaning of diversity, presenting a version of the local history as the only legitimate one.

The same can be said of the *GiraNoLo* free neighbourhood tours, in which the authors took part as participant observers. This kind of initiative is highly valuable as a free opportunity to get to know and deepen one's knowledge of local history, starting from its contemporary traces in the neighbourhood. That said, the local history narrated during the guided tours of NoLo is inevitably partial, as it stresses certain aspects and neglects other, equally legitimate, ones: largely unintentionally, the past is often interpreted in light of the present, with respect to ongoing projects and the current situation, such as the fact that those narrating the local history tend to position themselves as having a legitimate right to do so. In particular,

analysing the contents of the NoLo guided tours highlighted three recurrent features of the local area – a place of arrival for migrants, urban blight, and work – that sustain, and certainly do not contradict, the positioning of NoLo as the latest expression of a wider story, well established in the shapes and uses of the local buildings and the biographies of those who inhabited them.

As will be specified in more detail in the discussion section, we are not claiming here that NCS intentionally or strategically appears as universal and open while instead being covertly partial and purposefully exclusive. This is something that to some extent inevitably occurs, but it is also accentuated because of the urban events adopted as NCS's main repertoire of action: events act as effective weapons of cultural power, as they invite participation in pursuit of general goals while at the same time allowing events' organisers to subtly control the specific meanings of the goals they are pursuing, given that the latter are necessarily specified only when the events actually take place, through apparently irrelevant details (Citroni, 2020). Such forms of power, in the case of NCS, do not pertain solely to its urban events, but are also a feature of the functioning of this local civil society, which can be observed in other aspects, such as the process of the proliferation of Facebook sub-pages through which NSD grows with new activities and participants. This process is key to understanding both the dispersed strategy through which NCS manages to develop a variety of initiatives and events and the way in which it builds consensus and supports the organising process, as it facilitates the recruitment of new proactive participants for NCS's development.

The proliferation of NCS sub-pages is a double process, simultaneously light in its organisational logic and powerful in its effects. On the one hand, for the individual, creating a new group or participating in an existing one is a relatively undemanding task (Wuthnow, 1998). On the other hand, joining thematic groups brings with it major repercussions: it works as a powerful mechanism of consensus building, given that the new adherents – while focused, for example, on running, or knitting with others – simultaneously become proactive promoters of the development of NoLo as a civil society. Given its importance, it is therefore not surprising that the process of the proliferation of new interest groups is channelled through a Facebook page that details the instructions to be followed for the creation of a new NSD thematic group. On this page, the word "INCLUSION", written in large black characters



against a background of small coloured hands with smiling faces, is the title of the section dedicated to “NoLo Interest Groups” and the “List of thematic sub-groups and rules for opening”. The graphics resemble those seen on flyers, websites and brochures dedicated to volunteering and solidarity projects, in a similar effort to associate captivating images with empowerment and social cohesion programmes. As the introductory text states:

The important thing is not to segregate people and to ensure that everyone knows about the events and can participate in them; [...] For us, the key word is always the same: inclusion.

To ensure maximum “inclusion”, the text continues, six rules are established to which readers are “asked to pay attention”. The first of these dictates that the groups created “must be closed”, while the third states that individuals can only be accepted into these groups if they are already members of NSD). As mentioned above, it is not worth giving undue emphasis to the possible contradiction between the inclusion proclaimed by the group and its betrayal in the restrictive access rules. This contradiction would only apply to critical observers with a demystifying intent, not from the point of view of the person who wrote the page and therefore in the proposal it offers to the reader. It is therefore only an apparent contradiction, which reveals the same exclusionary/inclusive pattern mentioned above with respect to NCS events: the fact that its inclusionary attitude and aims have as a condition of possibility, and at the same time outcome, the ability to control and shape the local meaning of inclusion being pursued. Given its importance, however, it is vital to avoid misunderstandings about this form of “control” – and therefore power – activated by NCS, to which we will return in the final discussion, having first illustrated NSD’s political importance.

### **Mobilising Change: NCS as a Critical Partner of Critical Urban Policy**

As it moves from the characteristics that we mentioned above, the formation and consolidation of NCS can also be observed by looking at its complex, intense relationships with local public policy-making processes. Traditionally, Milan’s local governance system has been described as being uniquely oriented towards the mobilisation of a strong civil society and towards its inclusion in public policy-making processes. This legacy has positioned the city on the leading edge of more recent evolutions in urban governance, with the city government widely relying on social innovation initiatives, co-creation and co-design

processes such as urban living labs and other emerging governing technologies (Evans et al., 2015). Although tailored in a variety of ways and associated with different labels and narratives, all these initiatives have allegedly strived to produce a shift from a top-down to a co-production paradigm of public policy design and implementation (Coppola, 2019) based on the active inclusion of organised, although at times informal, groups of residents (Citroni, 2020).

In many ways, such patterns of local politics/civil society relations can be seen as a highly significant manifestation of the key promises of the increasingly dominant neo-liberal governance of the city, and more specifically the pledge not so much to govern “for the citizens” but to govern “with the citizens” (Deputy Mayor, 2019). <sup>1</sup>This promise is a major feature of the discourse of the city leadership and other relevant actors involved in the local system of governance and focuses in particular on issues of urban regeneration and related matters such as philanthropic institutions, social cooperatives and other intermediary organisations, academic institutions and knowledge providers (Coppola & Caudo, 2020). NoLo’s discursive order has found opportunities for consolidation and expansion through its links to some critical junctures between public policy and the NCS, activated by the city administration. Some of these junctures have proved to be particularly in line with the conditions of possibility of the new forms of urban civil society that are under examination here. The “call for projects” on one side and the creation of at times informal and rapidly evolving networks and partnerships on the other are the essential devices for the production of these policy arenas, which provide abundant activation and involvement opportunities for people with a high level of cultural and social capital.

In a way, the rise of NCS has become a source of acceleration of these processes at a local level, twisting the trajectory of public policy in a new direction. Until a few years ago, the city had been mostly engaged in a set of initiatives that revolved around “social cohesion”. These initiatives focused specifically on the most troubled section of the area, advancing a series of actions aimed at strengthening relations in apartment blocks, and improving the perception of safety in certain areas by funding highly professional actors already active in the

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<sup>1</sup> All interviewees are cited according to their occupation and the year during which they were interviewed

externalised social care economies. Settings such as the “cohesion laboratory” funded between 2014 and 2018 and managed by a social cooperative and a new 2017 call “with the aim of making peripheral areas ‘beautiful and happy’” (Comune di Milano, 2017) by funding similar actors epitomise this approach. The area was also included in the framework of the “Città Intorno” initiative promoted by the Cariplo Foundation, a key player in urban policymaking in Milan, and pursuing the betterment of local quality of life through “a series of engagement devices aimed at involving local communities” (Fondazione Cariplo, 2019). A goal not so different from that declared by another city-wide call for projects – “Eventi nei quartieri” – which supported “social, cultural and sporting initiatives aimed at animating 24 peripheral areas of the city” (Comune di Milano, 2019). All these programmes, albeit in different ways, clearly shared a focus on the promotion of “events” in the context of a wider set of actions. These events, taking place both in public and semi-public spaces such as neighbourhood courtyards, were seen in the discourse of both policy designers and providers as tools to enhance “social cohesion” and support “urban regeneration”, “creating community”, and “improving relations”. NCS has taken the focus on events, sociability and civilities in a new direction, while clearly heightening its political relevance by profoundly altering the traditional set of actors involved in their implementation.

### *Redesigning public space from below*

Two processes based on a variably significant dynamic of civil society mobilisation can be employed to observe how NCS became a critical actor in local policy making while also contributing to its restructuring. In 2018, the city launched a new call in its participatory budgeting programme aimed at funding small physical interventions based on a three-step process: the design of the proposal, an initial round of voting and subsequent technical assessment carried out by the city, and a final popular vote to choose two projects to put into practice for each municipality. A handful of mostly professional members of NSD decided to participate in the call with a project aimed at implementing a soft mobility strategy within the neighbourhood, which involved widening pavements, turning parking spaces into seating areas with vegetation and building cycle paths. The overall idea was to “re-appropriate public space” while enhancing bicycle and pedestrian mobility within the area and across the main thoroughfare, Viale Monza. The project was developed through a series of meetings and also

by using a Facebook group – *Nolopartecipa*, presented as a group belonging to NSD – where the promoters exchanged ideas, shared the results of meetings, published case studies and took on tasks regarding both the design and the networking required for the project. The group had 15 to 20 active members at the time of the design of the initiative and once the project was designed, an open Facebook page – now with 877 followers – with the project name “Mobi”. Some introductory events were organised both in the neighbourhood and outside, in part by turning other NoLo events – in particular, the Saturday morning breakfasts – into special events to support the projects throughout the final vote. All these activities were clearly framed as an “electoral campaign”. On the Facebook page, a series of posters portrayed a diverse set of neighbourhood residents and users conveying a slogan stating why they would support the project.

Despite gaining many votes, the project was not approved, as the municipality in which NoLo is located had four projects ranked in the first four positions city-wide, making the competition particularly challenging. In a post published on the Mobi page, promoters pointed to this very high level of fragmentation as the main reason for their failure and also underlined the very limited ability of the proposal to gather offline votes as opposed to online votes, as people could vote both ways. Months later, and based on an intervention from the city’s transport commissioner, a wider network formed incrementally, comprising city-level groups that had already promoted a similar experiment in another area of the city: *Genitori anti-smog*, a parents’ association advocating more effective anti-pollution policies; *Fiab* and *Ciclobby*, two cycling advocacy groups; and finally *CORE-lab*, a group of consultants in a range of matters including urban greening based in the area. A key resource that this sudden “scale jump” from a local to a city-level set of actors brought about was the inclusion of an activist-cum-professional who specialised in soft mobility projects and had designed an earlier similar intervention in the city. In this new situation, and differently from what would have happened in the context of the Participatory Budget, the implementation regime was a three-month experiment aimed at gathering evidence on how to implement “Zone 30” – areas with a speed limit of 30km per hour – in the city. The initiative was then relaunched with a new and more spatially limited design, in part due to the specialist’s intervention, through a series of meetings involving some of the original activists, activists from the newly included actors and the city’s transport experts. A new key actor – *CORE-lab* – was also included, which, initially

in charge of the greening component of the project, rapidly also engaged in activities related to conflict management and participation. As some residents voiced opposition to the experiment, mostly due to its impact on traffic and parking, *CORE-lab* organised focus groups and public meetings with the project's supporters and detractors. The idea behind the focus groups was that "the concept of the common good is constantly renegotiated", and that in the context of *TrentaMi in Verde* – the new name of the initiative – "the root problem is that these people (i.e. the opponents) did not feel [like] participants because they were not involved in what happens in the city and around them (...), so now that they have been involved, even by expressing discontent, they can feel part of a process".

After the project was approved by the city, the experiment was set up using wide grassroots participation from activists and some other city-based and external support. While activists belonging to different entities worked on the construction and installation of urban furniture and vegetation and brightening up the pavements, the city provided paint and some furniture, with other private companies and foundations offering small-scale financial support. The setting up of the experiment was organised as a three-day participative, hands-on festival. The three days included events as varied as an open-air breakfast with the inauguration of a book exchange point, site visits for school pupils, a poetry reading, a workshop on natural cosmetics organised by the *Nolo Plastic Free* group, a children's workshop run by the *NoLo4Kids* group, a tour organised by *GiraNolo*, a pillow fight and finally a party held at a local furniture outlet. On one of the days there was also a live broadcast by *RadioNolo*, while on another day an open-air sports event promoted by the school and the parents' committee was taking place as well, and was included in the programme of *TréntaMi in Verde*'s opening event. The focus on fun throughout the entire enterprise, clearly displayed on the project's Facebook page, was also paramount in the self-identification of the activists as, in the words of one of the promoters, "we do serious things but always with the aim of having fun, and every time we met for the upkeep of the site we also made sure to eat together and to have a good time" (NoLo and Mobì activist, Milan, 2020).

### *Formalising experiments into policy*

Once the project had been launched, the issues of managing it and consolidating it as a long-term solution became the top priority. On the first issue, NSD and *CORE-lab* signed a

collaboration pact with the city – a device put in place with the aim of involving and increasing residents' responsibilities in the care of public spaces – while activists continued with their maintenance days. On the second issue, the network promoted a petition on change.org and put petition sheets in some bars and shops that had supported the initiative and the development of NSD throughout (see Coppola, 2019). By the end of 2019, the collaboration pact, and the experiment itself, was over and the network announced on its pages the launch of “Dismounting 30MI”, participative days aimed at removing plants and furniture that were then donated to local schools. Later, right after the end of the most acute period of the Covid-19 crisis, the city administration announced the long-term consolidation of the project.

Shortly after the implementation of *TrentaMi*, another initiative was launched in the neighbourhood based on a partnership established by the city administration with *Bloomberg Associates (BA)*, a consulting spin-off involving some members of New York City's two Bloomberg administrations from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s. Along with another partner (Natco), this initiative experimented with fast, temporary redesigns of streets and under-used urban spaces, with the goal of limiting the presence of cars, improving walkability and creating new public spaces by hosting a range of activities and uses. By pushing administration departments to work collaboratively and by relying on a set of newly recruited young consultants, the partnership between the city and BA promoted several projects across Milan, later consolidating the initiative in a new programme – *Piazze Aperte* – based on a call to residents and other actors to present projects for specific sites (Comune di Milano, 2019b). A thoroughfare located in the NoLo area and originally part of the plan proposed by the *Mobi* project was chosen by the city to be a site for the experiment. While based on *Mobi*'s original ideas, the project was designed within the framework of collaboration between BA and the city departments and was presented publicly.

As it involved creating an entirely new public space in front of a school, with considerable impact on traffic flow and parking, the project rapidly led to polarisation between some residents and the local trade association – supported by the municipality's right-wing administration – opposing it and the NCS and a sizable group of school parents and NCS activists advocating it. Eventually, through more meetings, a final project including some changes in response to opponents' complaints was presented and realised. The final

implementation of the project involved a company – *Vestre* – as well as interventions from the city and large-scale participation from volunteers from the local groups and a city-wide group, *Retake*, which promotes clean-up campaigns in general. A celebratory event involving school children, local activists and key figures from the city administration was held to inaugurate the new square. And in this case too, a collaborative pact for the management of the site was set-up with *RadioNolo*, the school parents' committee and *Vestre*. Therefore, finally, as “there was a push, there were people able to scratch this negativity” and because the project “had a long gestation process through so many (policy) containers to give it a critical mass” (City consultant, 2020), the city was able to overcome local resistance. And once more, the proactive participation of NCS and its ability to bridge to other key groups – school parents in this case – was a critical resource for the success of the initiative.

#### Discussion: the subtle methods used to gather consensus and exert power

The variety of urban initiatives it produces illustrates how NCS features leisure activism in specific terms, only partially recalling previous discussions of the topic (Lamond et al., 2020). It is not an example of political activism openly adopting leisure to pursue its objectives, but rather a form of animation of and commitment to an urban space that widely relies on leisure initiatives as devices for building and reproducing a sense of local belonging and identity. Urban events are fundamental in shaping NCS, both in terms of its functioning and for the production of its local, social and political outcomes. Open-air markets, children's parties, neighbourhood breakfasts and other similar practices are seemingly trivial occasions, but considered together, concentrated in one neighbourhood, they can contribute to significant urban changes, such as gentrification processes (Gerosa, 2019); and when taken individually – focusing on their details, as in the in-depth analysis proposed above – they reveal an inclusive/exclusionary pattern that is fundamental to account for the type of power exerted by NCS, both through events and through other devices, such as digital communication.

This power reveals two recurrent features. First, it is not an attribute of any of the individual actors and its functioning does not result from any strategic intentionality. As shown with respect to the NSD Facebook sub-groups, the rules for fundamental aspects of their development – such as the eligibility requirements – are not imposed but merely asked to be followed in order to guarantee the maximum possible level of inclusiveness. Thus, no one is

responsible for the preventive exclusion of people from these groups or from the NSD page, as everyone is simply called upon to implement this rule while taking advantage of the opportunity to engage a large potential audience for their own initiatives.

Furthermore, NCS's leisure activism puts forward and consolidates a discursive order that, while largely drawing on common sense, has its own autonomy and produces its own implications, such as legitimising and sustaining certain uses of public spaces and associated urban transformations (Zukin, 2010). NCS develops its discourse in openly inclusive terms and this makes disentangling its exclusionary effects particularly difficult. Such effects may eventually become apparent in the context of conflicts involving NCS's responsibility for certain, more large-scale outcomes of its own existence, i.e. signs of the overall improvement of the area (Gerosa, 2019).

At the same time, even when the intentions are allegedly apolitical, NCS produces some quite significant political consequences. NCS's aforementioned ways of exerting power are put to work effectively and made visible by the mobilisation of NCS in the context of the two analysed policy design processes where it has played a genuinely disruptive role, including in respect to established forms of civil society. By engaging with and helping to shape these processes, NCS moves away from the traditional models of civil society engagement, both that based on externalisation – such as the aforementioned “social cohesion” projects managed by third-sector organisations – and the model based on a more adversarial style of local organising, built around demands that the government is expected to satisfy. In so doing, NCS has come to embody a new form of local agency as it represents a “more proactive bottom-up form” of local engagement that pushes the administration to organise “more transversal initiatives (...) by creating a critical mass around possible issues through the collaboration of different professions that happen to be in the same neighbourhood” (City councillor, 2019). By relying on the social and professional capital of participants, NCS shows its ability to package policy interventions, moving from the initial conceptualisation of ideas, their structuring across policy opportunities, the articulation of an organisational network and of a social alliance, local promotion and finally even the mobilisation of consensus-building strategies.



In this way, NCS has proved to be a critical, and in many ways unexpected, resource in *governing* the neighbourhood by considerably lowering the risks of policy action on behalf of the city administration and its political leaders. This has happened through a decisive reconfiguration of the traditional distribution of roles in policy-making processes that to a great extent leverages the production of forms of leisure activism.

As a city consultant stated, the “bottom-up” nature of the examined interventions – and more specifically of *Trentami in Verde* – that “the city supports but does not promote” (City consultant, 2020), allows policy “to become more of a relationship between residents themselves than between the residents and the city experts” (Architect, 2020). In this perspective, NCS’s leisure activism has increased the political feasibility of often contested interventions: building the street furniture together in a convivial way and have older women *ewing* on the temporary tables “is the real added value that has been instigated by NoLo” (Architect, 2020). As it has pushed residents to take the lead in policy innovation, it has also made them directly responsible for dealing with diverging preferences and outright resistance from other residents. In this sense, the role played by events – and more specifically leisure events – appears to have been transformed and made more effective in comparison to their use by more traditional actors and in previous policies. Events are no longer the outcome of the instrumental logic of specialised and formalised actors often linked to public funding, but rather an essential dimension of social mobilisation *per se* and a condition for the production of immediate and lasting outcomes in the local environment (Citroni, 2020).

### **Final Remarks. Gramsci’s Civil Society in Urban Contexts**

In search of legitimacy in an era of growing instability, where building consensus is increasingly difficult, urban governments are striving to establish collaboration with citizens (McLean, 2014) while mobilising forms of residents’ organisations, including informal groupings (Ranci, 2015). In Milan, as in other urban contexts, the transformation of the urban middle classes and the spread of “networked governance” models (Davies, 2011) have expanded the opportunities and arenas for the growth of a variety of civil society initiatives. More specifically, emerging civil society actors that commit to local leisure activism initiatives (Lamond and Spracklen, 2015) have received growing interest from city governments. Whether apolitical in their declared meanings or openly challenging the dominant norms and

ideologies (Gilchrist and Ravenscroft, 2013), current leisure practices and performances are invested with increasing political relevance, such as when co-opted in urban government and its governance arenas.

The analysis of NCS has proved to be an excellent opportunity to look closely at how emerging forms of civil society mobilising leisure activism practices can actually become influential in political processes. Generally considered highly ephemeral and fragmented or relevant just for their role as side elements in larger processes of social and economic change, the case of NCS' initiatives has shown how practices of leisure activism can prove to be politically relevant in a fairly outright way. We argue that this largely depends on their rooting in wider civil society structuring processes, characterised by a certain ability to pool resources and promote a discursive order around inclusiveness.

In this perspective, a Gramscian approach appears to be particularly compelling, as it is able to illuminate the unique aspects of the ways contemporary, emerging forms of civil society form and function. By rejecting the bourgeois idea of a civil society that is separated from the state (Gramsci, 1997), Gramsci brings these areas together: more precisely, defining the civil society of liberal societies and above all the hegemony that prevails there as the “ethical content of the state” (Gramsci, 1975, p. 703). As Gramsci's civil society is the field of struggle for hegemony (Gramsci, 1997), it is not the sphere of action of certain, predefined actors (Alexander, 2006) but the domain that includes all the actions through which different worldviews are put forward and – often silently – fight each other for legitimacy, to be accepted as “natural” and thus taken for granted (Citroni, 2019).

We argue that, as illuminated by this study, by endorsing such an approach we can better investigate and understand the strategic role of urban contexts in the production of forms of government *through* civil society, and in particular *by* leisure activism. As shown in the case study examined here, convivial and cultural events that aim to improve the local quality of life have become constitutive components of urban politics and policy-making processes (Tissot, 2014). These initiatives are clearly and actively involved and mobilised in an ongoing struggle for hegemony, which is facilitated by political actors and operationalised through highly experimental policy-making processes. Leisure activism, in this context, becomes a

decisive resource for exerting the subtle arts of power and influence in an ever-changing and hard-to-govern urban environment.

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