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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# EXPO 2015 AS A LABORATORY FOR NEOLIBERALIZATION

## Great Exhibitions, Urban Value Dispossession and New Labor Relations

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**ABSTRACT:** Great Exhibitions provide analytical lenses whereby capitalist development can be read from material as well as intangible perspectives. Thus, the paper approaches Milan EXPO 2015 through the grid of intelligibility provided by the concept of neoliberalism/neoliberalization, namely as a regulatory experiment. EXPO 2015 is first situated against the background of a growing body of literature which interprets mega-events as catalysts of territorial dispossession. Starting from the critical urban theory premise that neoliberalization is necessarily a spatial project, the features of urban space production set in motion by the World Fair are analyzed by paying particular attention to the ways in which social movements framed such transformations and eventually mobilized in reaction to them. Secondly, EXPO 2015 functioned as a laboratory for the implementation of unprecedented labor relations. In particular, the widespread recourse to voluntary or unpaid workforces is in connection with the shift from wage to human capital as the pillar of social mediation between productive subjects

**KEYWORDS:** human capital, neoliberalism/neoliberalization, territorial dispossession, unpaid labor

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## 1. Introduction

EXPO 2015 changed the life of Milan well beyond the six months of its official duration.<sup>1</sup> Immediately after the winning candidate was selected by the *Bureau International des Expositions* on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2008, EXPO 2015 became a field of contention for political elites seeking to gain control over a powerful consensus-machine. In 2009, the Great Exhibition started to be approached as a potential antidote to the global financial turmoil. In 2013, Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta stated that “EXPO 2015 is not just a fair, but the cornerstone of a strategy of economic recovery for the country as a whole”. Beginning in 2014, a significant number of corruption cases were reported and prosecuted with the very possibility of hosting the mega-event in Milan becoming subject to questioning (Barbacetto and Maroni, 2015a). Furthermore, EXPO 2015 was thoroughly criticized for its reliance on high impact infrastructures and unsustainable practices (AA.VV., 2015). To summarize: the city of Milan has been EXPO-centered for longer than five years now.

Given the huge effect the World Fair had on public opinion, it came as no surprise that its end did not defuse controversies; quite the opposite. EXPO S.p.A. President Diana Bracco contended that the “important objectives were met, the most fundamental one being the global sharing of an important theme for the future of the Earth”. In the same vein, Vicente Gonzales Loscertales, secretary of BIE, stressed that “the success of this event is mainly due to the encouragement it gave to discussion as well as to international commercial relations” (expo2015.org, 2015). However, such a view was also strongly criticized: journalist Marta Rizzo, commenting on a recent survey conducted by the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) *Mani Tese* and *AstraRicerche*, argued that “EXPO 2015 attracted millions of visitors but made no contribution to the general awareness of world hunger” (Rizzo, 2015).

The total number of visitors represented an additional matter of concern. EXPO S.p.A. CEO Giuseppe Sala estimated that “21.5 million people visited the fair” and sug-

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<sup>1</sup> Some background information may prove of relevance: EXPO 2015 was the 36<sup>th</sup> Universal Exposition and took place between May and October 2015 under the theme *Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life*. Almost 150 countries officially participated in the event, hosted in pavilions and other exhibitive structures, together with international organizations, NGOs and a significant number of private corporations operating in the agri-food sector. EXPO 2015 entailed the *ex novo* construction of an exhibition site located on the North-West boundaries of the city, on a site of 1.1 Km<sup>2</sup> divided between three municipalities (Milan, Rho and Pero), beside the main Fiera Milano fairgrounds. In addition to the construction of the main site, several secondary and interconnecting infrastructures were built and significantly influenced the urban development of the metropolitan area as a whole.

gested this would be proof “[of] the great job we have done, [of] the deep mark we made on citizen awareness” (expo2015.org, 2015). Far from sharing this conclusion, the Comitato No EXPO activists argued that the mega-event had actually left citizens with nothing beyond “debt, concrete and precariousness” (noexpo.org, 2015).

In order to grasp the specific meaning as well as the general framework of these conflicting interpretations, we propose to situate our analysis of the Milan EXPO 2015 against the background of *neoliberalism/neoliberalization* (Brenner et al., 2010a). We apply such a framework to the EXPO 2015 case by considering two types of sources: official documents released by EXPO S.p.A. or related to its institutional affiliates and counter-knowledge produced by social movements opposing the mega-event. By filtering such material through our theoretical grid of intelligibility, we correspondingly develop the hypothesis that EXPO 2015 constitutes an appropriate example of a neoliberal *regulatory experiment*. Furthermore, this experiment embodies the contemporary, transnational form of governance under neoliberal capitalism through:

- a) a specific production of spatiality/territoriality which not only dispossesses inhabitants, but also mobilizes new processes of value creation;
- b) the implementation of unprecedented forms of labor relations that mark the shift from *wage* to *human capital* as the pillar of social mediation between productive subjects.

Keeping in mind that “neoliberalization is never manifested in a pure form, as a comprehensive, all-encompassing regulatory whole” (Brenner et al., 2010a, p. 332), in the first part of the article (§2), we convey how the last Great Exhibition has symbolically represented the main features of the new political rationality – with its emphasis on the private sector, the subaltern role of public administrations and the colonization of social life by circuits of capital accumulation. Subsequently, we critically apply David Harvey's concept of *accumulation by dispossession* to the EXPO 2015 case and argue that, along with instances of 'traditional' expropriation based on explicit violence, new forms of value production emerged and gained prominence (§3). Lastly, we engage in a critique of the notion of *human capital* as it appears in neoliberal discourses to analyze the EXPO 2015 implementation of a new regime of labor relations (§4). A brief conclusion reflects on the role of social movements in opposing neoliberal trends as expressed around EXPO 2015 (§5).

## 2. EXPO 2015 as a Mirror of Neoliberalism/Neoliberalization

Great Exhibitions may be approached as analytical lenses whereby capitalist development expresses itself both from material as well as intangible perspectives. Indeed, as with other mega-events, EXPOs entail exploitative territorial transformations through which subjective use values linked to urban spaces are turned into exchange values (Roche, 2002). Moreover, World Fairs have historically worked as disseminators of images of capitalism consistent with coeval configurations of economic power relations. Writing about the first Great Exhibition – London 1851 – Marx and Engels stressed its character of industrial glorification: “it is a striking proof of the concentrated power with which modern large-scale industry is everywhere demolishing national barriers and increasingly blurring local peculiarities of production, society and national character among all peoples [...] With this exhibition, the bourgeoisie of the world has erected in the modern Rome its Pantheon, where, with self-satisfied pride, it exhibits the gods which it has made for itself” (Marx and Engels, 1850).

Thus, EXPOs mirror the tendencies of capitalist development. For example, we may conceive of the Crystal Palace (London 1851) or the Eiffel Tower (Paris 1889) as celebrations of the idea of *Progress*, of the success of the second, iron-based industrial revolution. Similarly, Luca Massidda (2011) suggests that early-20th century Great Exhibitions magnified the rise of mass society, whereas post-World War II EXPOs should be understood as narratives of the Cold War (especially Brussels 1958) and exaltations of the Fordist regime of regulation (especially Osaka 1970). Finally, starting from the 1990s – after an apparent death of over 20 years – World Fairs have made a triumphant comeback to symbolically mirror the rise of not only globalized neoliberalism but also of productive processes increasingly grounded on the commons (cultural as well as natural). A brief list of themes suffices to articulate this point: network society in Seville (1992), global cities and their biopolitical dimensions in Shanghai (2010), nature as a driver of accumulation in Hannover (2000) and food/energy as value creating strategies in Milan (2015).

In fact, EXPO 2015 openly conceived of food security and environmental protection as terrain for capitalist development. Virtually every pavilion reproduced the *green economy* wager of mutual support between financial capital gains and eco-system health, between multinational corporation agribusiness and global food security.<sup>2</sup> In

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<sup>2</sup> Beyond its humanitarian rhetoric, such a wager is the main characteristic of the much-vaunted Milan Charter, particularly in the passage where “we, women and men, citizens of the planet” are supposed to “strongly *urge* governments, institutions and international organizations to *commit* to [...] devel-

fact, the *Global Farmland* – a futuristic urban system of sustainable greenhouses designed by the architect Stefano Boeri<sup>3</sup> – was, in 2009, supposed to be a fundamental feature in the EXPO *conceptual masterplan*. Quite unfortunately, its remarkable environmental performance remained on paper and the project was first downscaled and then discarded on the grounds it was “excessively green”, according to EXPO S.p.A. CEO Giuseppe Sala (Tennyson, 2011).

The elective affinity between Great Exhibitions and the contemporary tendency of capitalist development allows us to approach the Milan EXPO 2015 through the grid of intelligibility provided by the concept of *neoliberalism/neoliberalization* (Brenner et al., 2010a). Such a notion has been used during recent decades in such different and generic fashions that it proves almost impossible to precisely situate its theoretical borders. Some authors have openly posited the risk of turning it either into a “rascal concept” (Brenner et al., 2010b) or into a “buzzword” (Peck, 2004). Nevertheless, we believe that such elasticity is not only to be considered as a regrettable limit; it is also a proof of the heuristic potential contained in the concept. In very general terms, 'neoliberalism' is meant to assess a process of transformation which, starting from the 1970s, intersects two different but strongly interrelated dynamics. Firstly, the *economico-ideological* dynamic that encapsulates the accomplished economic colonization of social life as a whole. And, secondly, the *politico-institutional* dynamic that assumes that the capitalist responsabilization of social actors (e.g. workers conceived of as self-entrepreneurs) is regarded as the essential mission of public administrations (Rossi and Vanolo, 2010).

The term 'neoliberalization' proves key here given how the concept highlights the processual nature of capitalism's historical unfolding. As Moini *et al.* emphasize, this concept encapsulates “the process through which neoliberalism becomes institutionalized. While neoliberalism is consolidated and reproduced in space and time, its values and normative principles are typified and de-personalized” (2013, p. 77). Thus, the emphasis is not only on neoliberal regulatory regimes but also on the procedures resulting in the progressive consolidation of such regimes. In particular, we focus on two dynamics that have characterized capitalist development in recent decades:

oping a system of open international trade [...] which can remove the distortions that restrict the availability of food, thereby creating the conditions for improved global food security”.

<sup>3</sup> “The project of a “global farmland”, based on a system of large greenhouses that reproduce the world's climatic conditions (tropical forest, savanna, desert, tundra, etc.) and with dozens of fields cultivated by the different countries participating in the 2015 event, constitutes the true heritage that the EXPO will leave Milan, the Lombard Region, the whole country. [...] The Global Farmland of Milan will transform the city into the world's future capital of agro-alimentary research” (Boeri, 2010).

- a) the market-led transformations of regulatory systems;
- b) increased commodification in all spheres of social life (which had previously been conceived of as pertaining to the sphere of *reproduction*).

For our purposes, the concept of neoliberalism/neoliberalization is crucial inasmuch as it simultaneously conveys – not necessarily without frictions – Marxist arguments underlining the implementation of class-oriented, tendentially top down policies (Harvey, 2005) and Foucauldian reflections aimed at emphasizing putatively *bottom up* innovations of governmental processes (Foucault, 2010). From this perspective, EXPO 2015 constitutes a fitting example of what Brenner et al. define as *neoliberal regulatory experiments*, namely “place-, territory-, and scale-specific projects designed to impose, intensify, or reproduce market-disciplinary modalities of governance” (2010a, p. 335).

From this perspective, three factors need highlighting. First, the production of space under EXPO 2015 was driven by globalized flows of capital investments which unleashed both territorial dispossession and new urban value production. Against the backdrop of critical urban theory, we frame the urban dimension as “a socio-spatial arena in which the contradictions of capitalist development are continually produced and fought *out*” (Brenner, 2000, p. 362). Such an approach assumes that capitalism reproduces itself through the production of space, in historical and geographical forms that are themselves shaped within different configurations of capitalist development (Lefebvre, 1976). Drawing on such an assumption, David Harvey proposes the concept of *spatial fix* to describe “capitalism’s insatiable drive to resolve its inner crisis tendencies by geographical expansion and geographical restructuring” (Harvey, 2001, p. 24). In other words, when capital is fixed in space it cannot be transformed or mobilized and thus devalues itself. *Contrary* to this outcome, when capital engenders expansive space production, it finds valuable new circuits for its surplus, whose accumulation under neoliberalism occurs at a faster pace than in the past. Moreover, spatial expansion depends upon “whether it is the search for markets, fresh labor powers, resources (raw materials) or fresh opportunities to invest in new production facilities that was chiefly at stake in the dynamics of capital accumulation through uneven geographical development” (Harvey, 2001, p. 26).

In this context, Great Exhibitions may be read as mega-events which catalyze global capital investments whose goal is to create and transfer value by means of producing space (Edizel, 2014). Through such mega-events, we are able to observe coexisting processes expanding the reproduction of capital (i.e. profitable investments in residential real estate that take advantage of the infrastructure built for EXPO) and accelerated devaluation (the destruction of the temporary exhibition site structures). In the case of World Fairs, the issue becomes complicated by the multiple timeframes of

space valorization, which, in turn, stem from the exceptionality of the event. In the short-run, space is produced for a limited, temporary use (six months in the 2015 case). In the medium- and long-run, that same space will have to be converted into new, profitable uses, eventually through additional investments.

Second, EXPO 2015 was governed in such a way that public resources and power protected and enforced market-led accumulation. For example, the risks of rapid devaluations of short-term investments were handled through direct intervention by the national government, which played a key role in enabling value-creation through investments in EXPO-related urban transformations. In fact, on consideration of the key investments in EXPO 2015 (see Table 1 and Table 3), it soon becomes clear that capital risks shifted from traders and financial companies to the national and local institutions that provided non-repayable funds. Meanwhile, private capital (gathered at the international level) was mobilized under this protective umbrella. As we argue in more detail below (§4), this derives from neoliberalization processes entailing a restructuring of the state-market relationship to such an extent that, in Michel Foucault's words, "one governs for the market, not because of the market" (Foucault, 2010, p. 121). Such an approach reflects in the multiplication of public-private partnerships (PPPs): the latter may benefit from significant public participation but remain exclusively regulated by private law (e.g. EXPO S.p.A.)<sup>4</sup>. Although these governance technologies are consolidated in national schemes of public/private relationships, we contend that EXPO 2015 takes them still one step further. In fact, it takes its *experimental dimension* to a higher level by implementing (and celebrating) a new model in which public money is directly invested into providing profitable opportunities for private concentrations of capitals. In this sense, the *socialization of risks* process paves the way for the *privatization of returns*.

Third, EXPO 2015 represented an attempt to explore and expand the scope of commodification of the urban space and of the spatial knowledge entrenched within. This constituted the original character of the circuits of valorization it mobilized. The recent literature on mega-events extensively adopts Harvey's concept of *accumulation by dispossession* to describe the predatory attitude of the mechanisms of urban value production and accumulation (Vannuchi and Van Criekingen, 2015; Olofsson and Peiteado Fernández, 2014). Harvey develops such a concept to define neoliberal processes of accelerated centralization of wealth and powers through the direct spoliation of tangi-

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<sup>4</sup> In Italy, this framework was first implemented in the Susa Valley, where the public-private partnership TAV S.p.A. attempted to build a deeply impactful high speed train line. To date, widespread grassroots resistance has blocked the works for the mega-infrastructure (Leonardi, 2013).

ble and intangible values entrenched in space. The concept defines a modality of value extraction from commodified assets through predatory practices which, being enclosure-based, re-activate “primitive accumulation” (Marx, 1990). Starting from the 1970’s, “accumulation by dispossession became a much more central feature within global capitalism” (Harvey, 2009, p. 74) because of the increased centrality of global concentrations of financial capital and their capacity to influence government policies at all levels. Such centrality opened up a significant debate primarily focusing on the *topicality* of primitive accumulation with regard to the successive stages of capital accumulation (Mezzadra, 2011). According to Harvey, “the balance between *accumulation by dispossession* and expanded reproduction has already shifted towards the former”, namely an extractive and non-reproductive form of accumulation (Harvey, 2009, p. 82). In this context, the controversial issue becomes ascertaining whether it is feasible to clearly distinguish between a mechanism of pure value accumulation and parallel processes of expanded capital reproduction (Mellino, 2014). As we discuss later (§3), we contend that in the case of EXPO 2015 these two mechanisms coexist in a non-exclusive manner. We would emphasize the importance of highlighting how part of the success of *accumulation by dispossession* as a category relies on its implicit emphasis on violence that characterizes the processes of urbanization pushed by global capital and backed by public institutions. For example, accumulation by dispossession becomes extremely relevant to describing the urban transformations fostered by the upcoming Rio de Janeiro Olympics, where the “reformulation of planning measures, commodification of land, privatization of public assets, forced removals of favelas and centrally located low-income dwellings continue to function to open up new fields for capital investment, releasing public or popular assets at a low cost” (Vannuchi and Van Criekingen, 2015, p. 12). Even if the violence of EXPO 2015 was never as explicit, we nonetheless contend that the rationale of value production and accumulation of Milan’s mega-event similarly relies on the utilization of public resources to provide profitable opportunities for capital investments in urban space production – while dispossessing the residents of their (tangible and intangible) commons. Our hypothesis is that the case of EXPO 2015 provides the scope for investigating various processes of transforming space in accordance with their *internal differentiation*. Whereas some moments are characterized by an intensification in the dispossession of public resources, others expand capitalist relations by commodifying the intangible use values attached to space. We refer here to the expansive capacity of capital reproduction to turn the social uses of space into profitable uses (Lefebvre, 1978; Purcell, 2002; Boer and De Vries, 2009). From this perspective, the commodification of space not only implies the exclusion or limitation of social uses of space, but also the co-opting of collective spa-



tial practices into rationalized conceptions of space for the purposes of commodification (Lefebvre, 1992).

### **3. EXPO 2015 as a Catalyst of Territorial Dispossession and New Value Production**

Accumulation by dispossession certainly constitutes a useful theoretical compass for analyzing the Milan 2015 World Fair. However, we do not propose an automatic application: rather, we wish to stress that the exploitation of the intangible dimensions of urban space in EXPO 2015 took place in at least two complementary ways. First, exploitation occurs through the definition of a symbolic territorial narrative of the event able to catalyze urban planning – general and specific alike – towards full alignment. Second, socio-spatial knowledge was subsumed under capital for immediate profit making and/or for the development and definition of the “official” narratives of the event. Indeed, the territorial marketing strategies implemented by EXPO 2015 required active engagement with local society as well as cultural cooperation with inhabitants and their organizations. All the main local economic players were involved in the collaborative development of shared representations of the city. Such a mechanism sought both to exploit the spatial practices and to build consensus around the event. As a consequence, the urban dimension of EXPO 2015 was characterized by the core influence of *myth-building activities*. The event's main theme was supposed to shape the tangible transformation of landscape as its dedicated infrastructures were intended to celebrate the values and social models embodied in the neoliberal meaning of *Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life*. Such a tight link between *sustainable imaginaries* and *urban metamorphosis* was clearly detectable in the Exhibition Site, situated on the North/West border of the city of Milan. The Exhibition Site was the center (geographically and symbolically) of an urbanization strategy which proved able to catalyze a broad range of transformations, both directly and indirectly related to the event. In fact, a significant number of urbanization initiatives aligned with the event's narrative. This however does not mean that such an alignment prove justified. Quite the opposite: the compatibility between the centrality of food/energy and the actual features of these urban initiatives becomes more than questionable.

In detail, we may distinguish between three groups of tangible urban transformations which occurred – and are partially still occurring – in close relationship with EXPO

2015 (Table 1 provides an overview of costs, including details regarding the public resources invested):

*Primary transformations:* regarding the Exhibition Site, the construction of temporary pavilions and connecting infrastructures – directly managed by the public-private partnership (PPP) EXPO S.p.A.;

*Secondary transformations:* medium/large infrastructures managed by Italian local authorities (across the levels of municipality, province and region), separately planned and subsequently aligned to the main event;<sup>5</sup>

*Other transformations:* interventions managed by public or private players who independently took advantage of the spaces and the opportunities opened up by EXPO 2015.

Although official data are still under processing and not subject to release until the second half of 2016, we believe we may conclude in favour of at least two considerations with regard to the value production processes enabled by EXPO 2015. Firstly, and most importantly, new infrastructures and public works – almost completely funded by public institutions – were designed to produce an increase in real estate value (Dell'Acqua et al., 2013) and to directly impact on the social and functional uses of urban space. Secondly, EXPO 2015 aimed at promoting the broader metropolitan area of Milan in international markets in order to attract additional capital investments and stimulate growth in the tourism sector through territorial marketing strategies based on the event's theme (Simeon and Di Trapani, 2011). From this perspective, the issue of food/energy emerges as a *greenwashed upgrade of pre-existing territorial brands* (Maggioni & Offtopic, 2013). Such brands mobilized well established stereotypes (e.g. the prestige of Italian cuisine and its purported 'traditional' or 'natural' features) and were then interrelated with the local scale as well as on a transnational scale. For example the historically rooted supplier/consumer relations between Milan and its countryside were re-packaged as a sustainable zero-Km strategy, culminating in the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (Milano Food Policy, 2015). This local policy agenda for the creation of comprehensive urban food strategies (Calori and Margarini, 2015) has been progressively evolved during EXPO2015 alongside the Milan Charter (Milan Charter) into an international agreement finally signed by more than 100 cities and submitted to the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in October 2015 (expo.rai.it, 2015). Other examples regards the framing of private urbanization projects under the umbrella of sus-

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<sup>5</sup> These include: Pedemontana motorway, BreBeMi highway, Tangenziale Est Milano (Italian Government, 2008).

tainability (§3.2) and the case of the Vie d'Acqua (§3.3), that tried to engage the historical figure of Leonardo Da Vinci as EXPO's champion.

We thus arrive at the following question: how did these two dimensions – real estate value and territorial marketing – interact? In other words: to what extent was the “green” narrative of EXPO 2015 consistently reflected in the urban plans which will outlive the event's timeframe? Is it possible, as many 'Expocritics' observed, that the green economy rhetoric was nothing other than a legitimating cover for merely lucrative initiatives, an ideological smokescreen put up to reduce social and political opposition? As seen above (§2), the original Conceptual Masterplan was progressively transformed and downscaled during the actual construction of the Exhibition Site. That subject to removal also directly targeted those features that were most closely related to the EXPO 2015 theme, such as the *Global Farmland*, or the Vie di Terra [*earthways*] and Vie d'Acqua [*waterways*] (Boeri, 2010; Italian Government, 2008). This means that, as regards EXPO's primary transformations, the link between urbanization and sustainability was ambiguous even on its own terms. Moreover, a similar or greater ambiguity concerns the secondary transformations and other independent initiatives, for example, the Pedemontana: a new infrastructure that was aligned to the EXPO 2015 narrative to attract consensus and whose environmental and financial sustainability was questioned not only by public opinion but also by monitoring institutions such as the “*Corte dei Conti*” (Mezzerà, 2015).

Before analyzing three specific cases, let us recall the implicit impossibility of capturing the linear and unique processes of neoliberalization through empirical analyses. According to Brenner et al., in fact, “neoliberalization tendencies can only be articulated in incomplete, hybrid modalities, which may crystallize in certain regulatory formations, but which are nevertheless continually and eclectically reworked in context-specific ways” (Brenner et al., 2010a, p. 332). Thus, urban neoliberalization tendencies are necessarily situated against pre-existing regulatory mechanisms, which are in turn entrenched in the social fabric of the landscape and in the history of resistance, conflicts and synergies between competing policy options. Moreover, a catalyst of neoliberalization such as EXPO 2015 was characterized by a thick *experimental dimension*, which was socially legitimated by the event's extraordinary and temporary nature. Consequently, EXPO 2015 works as a privileged standpoint to observe the deployment of neoliberalization tendencies only insofar as we embrace the scope for (slightly) contradictory findings and (partial) policy failures. Under neoliberalization, it is not uncommon for the outcomes of regulatory strategies to contradict their premises or even threaten the necessary conditions for their successful implementation (Gill, 2008). Policy failure in regulatory experiments “triggers the continuous reinvention of neoliberal

policy repertoires rather than their abandonment” (Brenner et al., 2010a, p. 333), paving the way for further experiments and policy transfers within homogeneous inter-jurisdictional systems.

However, the contradictory unfolding of neoliberalization tendencies mirrored by EXPO 2015 are observable in its empirical data, and especially in the following three cases.

### *3.1 Exhibition Site: an Act of Creative Destruction*

This first example approaches the mechanism of value production on the main Exhibition Site and refers to the data summarized in Table 1. EXPO 2015 took place on a 1,100,000 sq m. area of land formerly split between public and private owners (with around 75% of the total area), including some of the largest Italian real estate companies and the Fondazione Fiera [*Fair Foundation*]. This latter is the main private player in the metropolitan area and the owner of a vast exhibition compound in the urban area bordering EXPO 2015. In order to 'enclose' the area, a new PPP (called AREXPO) was set up and included all the local authorities and the Fondazione Fiera (see Table 2), whose position as simultaneously owner and seller exposed AREXPO to a permanent conflict of interests. Indeed, while EXPO S.p.A. was in charge of the event, AREXPO was attributed with supervision over the long-term development of the exhibition site and supposed to capitalize on the tangible legacy of the primary urbanization stemming from the event. Originally, the land had a limited level of buildability and required expensive land reclamation mechanisms (according to the data reported in the EXPO 2014 financial statement, the €6 million foreseen cost actually rose to almost €70 million with debate remaining over the exact amount [Soglio, 2015a]). Nonetheless, when AREXPO was founded, the patrimonial value of the land was granted increased buildability with the compensation paid out to private owners calculated accordingly. In this first stage, the value was created through an *artificial manipulation of urbanization rights for the Exhibition Site*, based on the scenario projected by the EXPO 2015 Masterplan. €2.1 billion in public funding was invested in the land owned by AREXPO for primary construction work. These eventually turned a polluted and non-buildable area into a fully infrastructural portion of space and highly interconnected with the metropolitan region's mobility system. Although it remains unclear what usage this area will be put to after the end of the World Fair, the public investments will most likely generate returns that are only partially reflected in the new land value estimates. This probably explains why a first auction set up by AREXPO for transferring ownership of the exhibition site with a base price of €240 million received no bids in autumn 2014 – demonstrating that

no private player was interested in such an over-valued space. An alternative scenario incorporates the intervention of the Italian government through new investment to avoid the abandoning of the site – as has already happened with other EXPOs. A summary of the land value transformation process along the EXPO is provided in Picture 1, including information on the main investment and compensations between public and private players involved.

This example highlights how mega-events imply a planned devaluation of space and how the cost of this devaluation is met by public financial resources. The dismantling of the exhibition site and the destruction of the colored pavilions do seem to symbolize what Joseph Schumpeter would indeed call *creative destruction*.

### *3.2 Cascina Merlata: Piggybacking on Public Investment*

The second example concerns a private urbanization project that took place in the area surrounding the exhibition site. This project aimed at indirectly exploiting the added value generated by infrastructures built for EXPO 2015 as well as its green narrative. Cascina Merlata covers an area of 540.000 sq m. that functioned as the EXPO Village, hosting international guests during the event. This is undergoing conversion into a residential area. The urbanization of Cascina Merlata aligns with the green narrative of EXPO 2015 and its marketization promises a sustainable house to future inhabitants in an extremely well-connected area ([cascina-merlata.it](http://cascina-merlata.it)). The EUROMILANO shareholders, the project company responsible, feature banks (including Intesa Sanpaolo, an official EXPO 2015 partner) and other major players in the real estate market. According to the information available (Pavesi, 2009), an investment of €500 million in Cascina Merlata is expected to return revenues of €800 million. This was not the only initiative seeking to exploit the opportunities opened up by EXPO 2015: several others also took place. However, there is every eventuality that the EXPO 2015 aligned private initiatives, plans and narratives ended up partially constricted by the current stagnation prevailing in the Italian real estate market (Agenzia delle Entrate, 2015).

### *3.3. Vie d'Acqua: a (Failed) Attempt to Marketize Leonardo's Legacy*

The previous examples convey how the intangible dimension of EXPO 2015 served mainly as a legitimacy-provider for urban transformations that will in all likelihood fail

to respect their own rhetorical promises in the long-run. However, this was not the only critical issue as regards the contradictory experimental dimension of EXPO 2015. A different paradigm of urban space commodification is represented by the case of Vie d'Acqua, specifically an attempt to exploit spatial practices that were socially produced through the historical relationships between inhabitants and their territory. In fact, Vie d'Acqua provides the name of an important facet to the original EXPO 2015 Masterplan (Boeri, 2010): a specific project aimed at reorganizing and refurbishing the system of artificial channels [*navigli*] that cross-cut the metropolitan area of Milan and that had shaped relations between the city and its countryside since the 12th century. The figure of Leonardo Da Vinci (who was involved in late 15th century attempts at technologically improving the artificial basins) was extensively deployed in the first stages of the Great Exhibition. As with other components of the Masterplan, the Vie d'Acqua project was also progressively downscaled to a much simpler plan of non-navigable channels (Offtopiclab, 2014). The original, ambitious promise to make of the Vie d'Acqua a new public service shifted to become a purely territorial marketing operation in which the Vie d'Acqua would mainly serve touristic purposes. Moreover, the impact on parks and public spaces crossed by these new infrastructure would have been significant, implying a limitation and alteration to the actual fruition of these spaces by inhabitants. Thus, the Vie d'Acqua project was met by strong local opposition (grouped under the name Comitato No Canal [*No Channel Committee*]), which was able to further circumscribe the final intervention to merely the Exhibition Site itself. Moreover, the No Canal movement succeeded in stopping plans for further urban transformations that would have affected a broader area. In this case, the attempt to co-opt the spatial knowledge of inhabitants encountered significant opposition due to the evident speciousness of the project. Moreover, such opposition developed into a local movement whose goal became the *re-appropriation of space*, conceived of as the capacity to “oppose capital’s ability to valorize urban space, establishing a clear priority for the use value of urban residents over the exchange value interests of capitalist firms” (Purcell, 2002, p. 103).

#### **4. EXPO 2015 as a Laboratory of New Labor Relations**

The experimental dimension of EXPO 2015 may clearly be appreciated through its approach to labor relations. We hold the conviction that in order to properly grasp this social experimentation, we need to interconnect it with a Foucauldian framework in

order to analyze neoliberalism as a political rationality (Rose, 1999). Such a framework stems from a shift in emphasis from the *liberal* centrality of the notion of *exchange* to the *neoliberal* reliance on *competition* as a generalized principle of formalization.<sup>6</sup> This shift implies a profound modification: whereas liberal governmentality incorporated the social mediation of economic interests as expressed by different actors, neoliberal governmentality engenders the “extension of economic analysis into previously unexplored domains” (Foucault, 2010: 219). Similarly, the historical form of social mediation changed: whereas liberal governmentality was marked by the centrality of *wage* as a social institution, namely as a recognition of alterity and its management through a compromise (the ruling class gains social peace by conceding consumption-based integration to the working class), neoliberal governmentality relies on the putative equality of individuals/enterprises who struggle to better valorize their *human capital* (Chicchi, Leonardi and Lucarelli, 2016).

By highlighting the pervasive nature of such a transformation, Massimiliano Nicoli indicates the kernel of neoliberalism in the twofold process of “companies' governmentalization and state's managerialization” (Nicoli, 2015, p. 173).

The first aspect concerns neoliberalism as a specific form of *production of subjectivity* (Read, 2009), based on a new approach to productive factors, as developed by the so-called Chicago School in the 1960s and early 1970s. This group of American economists – including Theodore Schultz, Gary Becker, Jacob Mincer and, in general, those associated with the *Journal of Political Economy* – revolutionized their research field through the notion of *human capital*. Their main goal was the generalization of market relations to the totality of social spheres. This theoretical effort generated significant intellectual innovations, with an economics-based understanding of crime, family, marriage, capital punishment, and so on. However, its main tenet presents a different *view of labor*: this is no longer the irreducible “other” of capital, but rather one of its various possible forms. This peculiar human capital is composed of previously overlooked 'assets' such as education, professional experience and mobility (but also language, affect, care). According to Foucault's reading of Becker, the procedure whereby labor becomes defined as human capital represents a relatively straightforward process: individuals work for a wage and, from their perspective, that wage is income; whenever income gets conceived of as the product or return on capital, then it proves possible to

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<sup>6</sup> We believe that this passage may also be read from a (post)Marxist perspective. Without going into detail, it seems that recent analyses of the shifts from Fordism to Post-Fordism (Virno and Hardt, 1996), and from industrial capitalism to cognitive capitalism (Lucarelli and Vercellone, 2013), at the very least justify such a possibility.

define labor *as* capital; since such labor is inseparable from its bearer, then it is laborers themselves that end up conceived of as enterprises. Thus, from this perspective, “the worker himself appears as a sort of enterprise of himself”, or as an “entrepreneur of himself” (Foucault, 2010, p. 225-226). Thus, in Foucauldian terms, human capital is not so much an economic category but rather a governmental device attuned to neoliberalism as a political rationality.

The second relevant effect of the shift in emphasis from exchange to competition derives from the necessity of constant state intervention not *on* the market (to fix negative outcomes or unexpected side-effects), but rather *within* its conditions of possibility (to structure reality according to its needs). Rather than a detached referee supposed to supervise the rules of the market-game, what is now needed involves *interventionist governmentality*, a proactive political entity whose task requires incessantly re-creating the material conditions of a given society according to competition. As Foucault summarizes, in neoliberalism “one governs for the market, not *because of* the market” (*Ibid*, p. 121). The analysis carried out by the German Ordoliberals<sup>7</sup> perfectly exemplifies such a transformation. According to their perspective, the main problem in fact involves producing “a state under the supervision of the market rather than a market under the supervision of the state” (*Ibid*, p. 116). In other words, what needs testing is the capacity of a market economy based on competition to shape the state and re-form society. Competition, therefore, becomes a social model centered around inequality (as opposed to the crucial role of formal equivalence in a system structured around contractual exchange). This inversion of roles between market and sovereignty “displaces the naturalist idea of *laissez-faire*, which needs an essence, whereas competition is a principle of formalization, and as such is produced by an effort, by a tendency” (Zanini, 2010, p. 95). What in classical liberalism was an indirect separation between the political sphere (state) and the economic sphere (market) gets substituted in neoliberalism by a mutual interference.

As discussed above (§2), we may observe both facets (companies' governmentalization and state's managerialization) in EXPO 2015 as a catalyst of unprecedented dispossession. However, our hypothesis posits that the same holds for EXPO 2015 as a laboratory for the experimentation of new industrial relations. We propose the Milan Great Exhibition as a paradigm of job market reform in times of austerity. In fact, EXPO 2015 has unmistakably established *free or unpaid labor as a normal condition of contemporary value production*. In particular, the mobilization of a *voluntary workforce*

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<sup>7</sup> Amongst others: Walter Eucken, Franz Boehm, Mueller-Armack, Wilhelm Roepke and, in general, those involved in the journal *Ordo* (founded in 1936).



has been striking: in July 2013, the confederal unions (CGIL [*Italian General Confederation of Labor*], CISL [*Italian Confederation of Workers' Unions*], UIL [*Union of Italian Workers*]) and EXPO 2015 S.p.A. signed a collective agreement which allowed and even encouraged the employment of working volunteers, up to 18,500 units (according to initial estimates, such a number would have accounted for 90% of the total workforce employed at the fair) (CGIL, 2013). As Roberto Ciccarelli aptly commented: "With the approval of the confederal trade unions, the Milan EXPO has thus become a crucial first step toward the institutionalization of underpaid and free labor in Italy. By relying on a network of volunteering agencies and non-profits, this system puts precarious workers and volunteers in competition and harvests their hopes with the justification that 'it's better than nothing'. In other words, better to work for free than to be unemployed" (2015a, p. 424).

Many analysts highlighted how such an underlying logic establishes a direct continuity between the *July Agreement* and the *Jobs Act*, the national reform recently approved (February 2015) by the Renzi Government, which accomplished a simplification of the Italian labor system by means of institutionalizing precariousness.<sup>8</sup> An intermediate feature of such an institutionalization is the *Youth Guarantee Plan*, proposed by Labor Minister Giuliano Poletti and recently approved (May 2014), which openly encourages unpaid labor in the form of free internships. In this context, the *July Agreement* is key because it makes national contracts derogable in such a way that worker terms and conditions are legally susceptible to worsening. This implies not only a weakening of the collective bargaining rights of wage laborers (whose total number in EXPO 2015 ended up much lower than expected), but also a legal and massive recruitment of voluntary workers. Even if, after the corruption-based scandals in 2014, the number of voluntary workers was reduced to 10,000 units, they still accounted for more than 50% of the total workforce. The EXPO 2015 Volunteer Program was subdivided into several tracks. A 'short-term experience' option was available for those who wanted to commit five and a half hours a day to the event over a two-week period (7,000 units). 'Long-term volunteers' were able to take part more extensively through state-managed Civil Service Projects (12 months) connected to the Great Exhibition. Here, the ancillary position of the state with regard to EXPO S.p.A. becomes particularly striking. Another opportunity stemmed from participation in projects coordinated by the event's volunteer program, *DoteComune EXPO 2015*, working for five days a week (6 months). A further form of volunteering was labelled as 'volunteers for a day' [*Vo-*

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<sup>8</sup> This critique has been a constant feature of the No EXPO movements. See, for instance, Fumagalli, 2014 and Clash City Workers, 2015.

*lontari per un giorno*], and included corporate volunteers who worked at the World Fair for a one-off, five-hour day. Finally, students from 'the school project' [*Progetto Scuola*] acted as guides for their peers through the pavilions. All candidates for these positions were screened and trained by the Volunteering Service Centers [*Centri di Servizio per il Volontariato*], once again demonstrating how profoundly economic competition shapes not only private enterprises but also public administrations and the non-profit sector ([volunteer.expo2015.org/en/programs](http://volunteer.expo2015.org/en/programs)).

To summarize: the jobs created by EXPO 2015 almost entirely constitute *unpaid services* which, in most cases, make previously waged positions redundant (e.g. professional guides, translators, hostesses & stewards). This confirms Sergio Bologna's diagnosis according to which "the event-based economy does not create jobs; it kills them" (Bologna, 2015, p. 81). Moreover, the very adjective 'voluntary' is misleading when applied to 'work'. In fact, according to the Italian Framework Law 166/1991, art. 1, *volunteering* means "an expression of participation, solidarity and pluralism [...] whose goal is to be social, civil and cultural in character". As the main goal of EXPO S.p.A. is profit, this lexicon proves utterly incorrect: these people are clearly not *volunteers*, but *unpaid workers* (Vitale, 2015). Thus, Marco Bascetta recognizes a "vast area of dis-retribution" at the core of the EXPO 2015 model. Moreover, such an area no longer represents a temporary situation between an initial status of 'unemployed' and a subsequent, supposedly normal status of 'employed'. According to Bascetta, "free labor is not situated at the margins of the system but constitutes a crucial source of surplus-value extraction" (2015, p. 17-19). In other words, when unpaid labor becomes a general feature of value production a parallel phenomenon appears: the *professionalization of volunteering* (De Angelis, 2015).

This raises the following question: why do people accept working for nothing? Bascetta proposes approaching such an issue by analyzing what he calls the *political economy of promising*, that is, a governmental device which substitutes wages with either the "promise of future employment" or mere "visibility" (*Ibid.*). Such a device extends well beyond the temporal borders of EXPO 2015: in fact, as sociologist Andrew Ross argues, the centrality of wage labor as experienced in the industrial era has been replaced by a process of "working for exposure" whose resulting income is expressed through "the affective currency of attention and prestige" (Ross, 2014, p. 3). In other words, unpaid labor provides so-called volunteers with the symbolic currency of *social inclusion*, which becomes equivalent to the recognition of one's self-entrepreneurship. These reflections are consistent with the neoliberal transformation of wages into human capital. Thus, we believe that the reason people accept working for nothing stems

from their perception that this 'nothingness' represents a direct investment in their own human capital.

## 5. Conclusions

At the time of writing (March 2016), EXPO 2015 has formally been over for two months. Nevertheless, its constant presence in the city of Milan's social experience is palpable. On the one hand, heated discussions continue over the usages to which the Exhibition Site will be put in the near future – most recently the hypothesis of hosting a “global research center on genomics, big data, nutrition, food and sustainability” has been advanced (La Repubblica 2015). On the other hand, former EXPO 2015 S.p.A. CEO Giuseppe Sala will be the center-Left coalition's candidate for Mayor in Milan's 2016 local elections. Furthermore, polemics about cost overruns and excessive debts appear in local as well as national broadsheets on a daily basis (Barbacetto and Maroni, 2015b).

However, EXPO 2015's persistence extends well beyond the borders of Milan's metropolitan area. Its nature, we contend, is thoroughly *paradigmatic*. In fact, the latest World Fair conveyed the neoliberal tendency of capitalist development, catalyzed by an unprecedented form of dispossession and testing a new regime of industrial relations that has already shaped major labor market reforms at the national level. Hence, this explains our analytical approach to EXPO 2015 as a laboratory for neoliberalization. In our opinion, the mega-event has been successful in converting neoliberalization tendencies into social practices of urban as well as social transformation. In order to properly grasp such success, however, we should connect this to the resistance and opposition (or the lack thereof) to EXPO 2015 as expressed by a variety of social movements. As a starting point, it is important to acknowledge that many critical voices were raised before the Great Exhibition began. With regard to the primary transformations, concerns mostly focused on excessive debt levels and misuses of public funding. As for the secondary transformations, the presence of already-established activist groups (No Pedemontana, 2015; No TEM, 2015) gave visibility to the oppositional front, especially at an initial stage. Nonetheless, the network did not succeed in expanding beyond the activist community and, as a consequence, progressively lost the capacity to actually influence or even stop EXPO-related projects. One significant exception came with the case of No CANAL, briefly discussed above (§3): here, activists were able to involve non-politicized residents by focusing on issues such as the collective imaginary traditionally attached to natural parks as public spaces and the anti-corruption discourse, which played a crucial role in mobilizing people (Offtopiclab, 2014). What we believe proves particularly important as regards this political experience is the deconstruction

of the artificial conception of space engendered by EXPO 2015, namely its attempt to commodify social life without paying or compensating for it (i.e. without recognizing the counterpart as *dispossessed*). This *deconstructive move* opened up the scope for re-signifying space and re-appropriating its social meaning. However, we must also stress that the economic interests involved in the Vie d'Acqua [*waterways*] project were not as fundamental as in others, and this facet obviously facilitated the movement's success (which nevertheless remains highly relevant).

Quite differently, resistance to the widespread recruitment of volunteering workforces generally remained weak. Although the intellectual production of counter-discourse somehow portrayed the ideological character of neoliberalization, no movement really managed to massively mobilize around such crucial issues. The campaign against unpaid labor – #IoNonLavoroGratisPerExpo – gained some momentum right before the opening of the World Fair (May 1<sup>st</sup>) but lost its political efficacy in the aftermath of a very controversial May Day parade, marked by mass-participation (over 30,000 people) but also by violent riots. Such riots were stigmatized by local authorities that managed to politically capitalize on public outrage by launching an official parade named “Nessuno tocchi Milano” [*Don't touch Milan*] in response to the symbolic and material legacy of the riots. Surrounded by extreme and supportive media attention, a “Scrubber Army” of 20,000 – led by Milan Mayor Giuliano Pisapia along with important EXPO representatives – crisscrossed the city to clean the streets from graffiti and litter. The main consequence of the march was the consolidation of consensus in favor of EXPO 2015. This actually extended to actors and stakeholders that had hitherto been skeptical with regard to some of the main contradictions of the mega-event (Soglio, 2015b). In fact, EXPO 2015 did not encounter significant opposition after the May Day parade. The space for dissent was limited to a few voices, fragmented grassroots micro-initiatives and corruption-focused inquiries.

However, the difficulty in dealing with the paradigmatic nature of unpaid labor in contemporary circuits of valorization does not constitute a feature exclusive to No EXPO movements. Instead, this concerns opposition to neoliberalization as a whole and on a global scale. One of the main problems, we believe, is that social movements have not yet started to envisage a system of social mediation which is simultaneously *alternative to the wage as an institution and effective in opposing different forms of “actually existing neoliberalism”* (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). How is exploitation practiced outside the wage-form? How can the exploited organize and fight back? Dealing with these key questions – even simply posing them – may be a proper first step to tackling neoliberalization.

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**Table 1: EXPO Investments**

Source	EXPENDITURES (Millions of €)	
	Dossier EXPO (Italian Government, 2008)	Rapporto di Stabilità (EXPO 2015 SPA, 2013)
Primary Investment (SITE)	€ 1,746	€ 1,300
Primary Investment (Connection)	€ 1,162	€ 823
TOT Primary Investment	€ 2,908	€ 2,123
Foreign Investments		€ 1,000
Secondary Investment	€ 10,084	
Management Costs		€ 850

Source: Dossier EXPO (Italian Government, 2008); Rapporto di Stabilità (EXPO 2015 SPA, 2013)

**Table 2: PPPs at EXPO 2015**

<b>Public-Private Partnerships in EXPO 2015</b>			
EXPO SPA		AREXPO SPA	
Joint Stock € 120,000		Joint Stock € 94,000,000	
Ministero Economia e Finanze	40.00%	Regione Lombardia	34.67%
Comune di Milano	20.00%	Comune di Milano	34.67%
Regione Lombardia	20.00%	Fondazione Fiera	27.66%
Provincia di Milano	10.00%	Provincia di Milano	2.00%
CCIA Milano	10.00%	Comune di Rho	1.00%

Source: [www.expo2015.org](http://www.expo2015.org); [www.arexpo.it](http://www.arexpo.it)

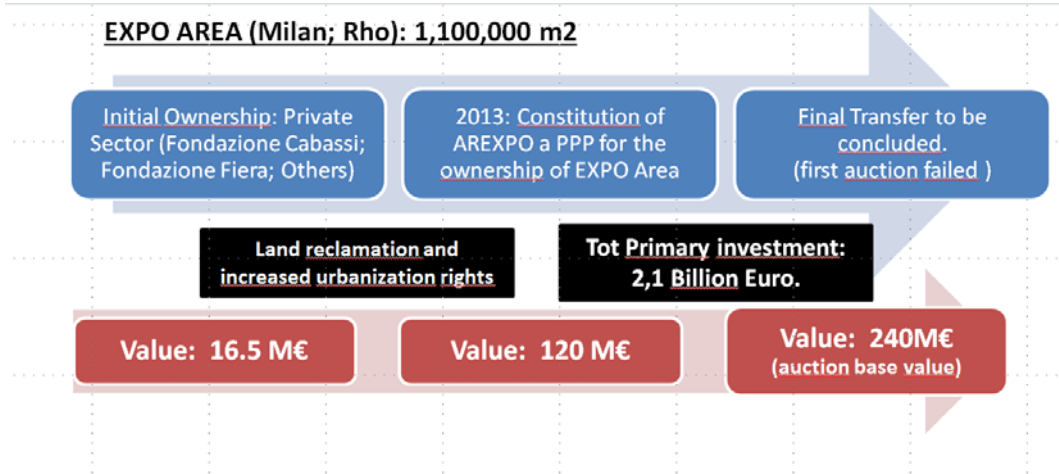
**Table 3: EXPO 2015 Expected economic impact**

	<b>Investment*</b>	<b>Gross Prod*</b>	<b>GDP Growth*</b>	<b>New wages</b>
<b>Primary Investment (SITE)</b>	1.3	3.6	1	16900
<b>Management Costs</b>	0.9	2.4	0.6	10200
<b>Foreign Investments</b>	1	2.8	0.7	13000
<b>Touristic Flow</b>		8.8	3.8	73700
<b>Legacy</b>		6.2	2.5	47400
<b>Total</b>	3.2	23.8	10.1	161200
<b>Secondary Investment (Ext.)</b>	10.2	20.6	10.2	204034

Source: Dossier EXPO (Italian Government, 2008); Rapporto di Stabilità (EXPO 2015 SPA, 2013)

\* Billions of €

Picture 1: Land Value Transformation



Source: (Maggioni & Offtopic, 2013)