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**Exploring practices and spatialities of urban transformation: the role of power
in urban governance**

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Abstract

This PhD thesis is a qualitative study that attempts to broaden urban geography's reach in regard to the forces affecting the production of the city. It focuses, in particular, on governance aspects and the local mechanisms of power that they underpin to provide a fresh look at central issues of urban transformation such as an actor's capacity to act and collective action.

As the thesis adopts a framework informed by urban politics, a crucial effort is that of accounting for the methodological bias of such studies, which assume that the urban scale is a pre-given, relatively discrete container of political-economic processes. This shortcoming is counterbalanced considering the urban dimension and multiscale nature of the power relationships under study.

The thesis is written in the form of academic papers investigating separate issues under the umbrella of local power mechanisms in urban transformation. The first paper is a theoretical work, whereas the second and the third ones are empirical works. They deal respectively with: the explanatory power of urban regime theory beyond its original Western-centric and urban-centric foci (Paper 1), the role of criminal organisations in the production of the city (Paper 2) and the possibility of progressive forces to shift agendas away from the issue of attractiveness (Paper 3). Distinct bodies of literature contribute to the three papers and add to the overall interest in practices and spatialities of urban transformation—e.g. political science (Paper 1), criminological literature (Paper 2) and urban planning one (Paper 2 and Paper 3).

In terms of methodology, the thesis is characterised by an explorative attitude. On the one hand, the theoretical paper attempts to trace novel research trajectories in urban governance theory through a longitudinal literature review. On the other, the two empirical papers deal with under-researched contexts of urban transformation by means of a case study methodology led by an information-oriented selection of critical cases.

This implies that the purpose is neither to achieve generalisation or comparison at all costs, nor to provide a comprehensive analysis of urban transformation. Since the

three papers grasp relations and possible new interpretations as for the issues under study, there is room for extending the analysis of these trends—e.g. through quantitative research and comparative qualitative studies.

Overall, the three papers show that the relation between “power to” (i.e. an actor’s capacity to act), “power with” (i.e. consensual interactions between actors) and “power over” (i.e. domination of an actor over another one) dynamics offer worth-considering insights through which to read practices of urban transformation and patterns of production, regulation and consumption of urban space.

Paper 1 looks at the evolution of urban regime analysis (URA)—a school of political science that is considered a precursor to urban governance and in which the issue of “power to” is crucial. The paper identifies the rise of a new wave of URA that draws from urban geography and tackles URA’s original Western-centric and urban-centric foci. In doing so, it argues that much of the potential of this cross-disciplinary contamination is still unexplored and the study of urban regimes would benefit from a thorough confrontation with debates in urban geography.

Paper 2 argues that the local mechanisms of “power to” that constitute the grey area of urban governance allow the infiltration of mafia-type organised criminal groups in urban development. The paper has a focus on peripheral areas and identifies those place-bound aspects that foster the infiltration process. By investigating two peripheral municipalities set in northern Italy, it claims that: first, the structural weaknesses of peripheral municipalities with regard to their political-administrative spheres amplify the shortcomings of the planning process; second, peripheral property markets present some features that make them more likely to be affected by the economic input of mafia-type organised criminal groups.

Finally, Paper 3 examines new municipalist politics and the local power-rationality relations that result from the concurrent implementation of participatory governance solutions and the urban commons agenda. By examining the case of an Italian mid-sized progressive city, it shows how coalition politics prevail over progressive claims by exploiting the ambiguities of new municipalism—in particular, by means of “power over” practices that are concealed under the guise of “power with” institutional solutions.

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Introduction

1. Making sense of urban transformation through urban governance

Change is the hallmark of the urban landscape, making it “restless” (Knox, 1993). According to Hall, “the only consistent thing about cities is that they are always changing” (2006, p. 3). However, it is not as straightforward to make sense of urban transformation. “The urban” is, indeed, “a key moment within broader, multiscale processes of capitalist development and state regulation” (Brenner, 2009, p. 134). This means that a city is shaped by a number of factors such as its size, the nature of its economy, the nature of the nation within which it is located and its relationship to the world economy (Savage et al., 2003).

Urban geography has a long history of theories formulated to classify what characteristics are present in urban areas as a result of these factors—for a review see Caves (2013), Fyfe and Kenny (2005) and LeGates and Stout (2020). Given the diverse nature of the factors at play, their constant evolution and the complexity that derives from that, it has been pointed out that urban theories may benefit from the application of “an eclectic range of perspectives” (Hall, 2006, p. 34). Urban governance offers worthwhile insights in this regard, particularly when it questions not just *who* governs, but *how* governments and various actors involved in governance processes operate (Le Galès, 2013, 2017).

This thesis draws from such remarks and, throughout the three papers that compose it, accounts for separate issues of urban transformation: the explanatory power of urban regime theory beyond its original Western-centric and urban-centric foci (Paper 1), the role of criminal organisations in the production of the city (Paper 2) and the possibility of progressive forces to shift agendas away from the issue of attractiveness (Paper 3). The first paper is a theoretical work, whereas the second and the third paper are empirical ones.

Building on the abovementioned eclectic perspective, distinct bodies of literature contribute to the three papers and add to the overall interest in the field of urban geography—in particular, political science as for Paper 1, criminological and urban planning literature as for Paper 2 and urban planning literature as for Paper 3.

Against this backdrop, urban governance is understood as an analytical framework that “opens up the black box of the state” (Bevir, 2013, p. 1) and helps understanding the changing forms of collective action and the capacity to act at the local level. However, this approach is disconnected from the goal of identifying “new governance” forms as a desired model of public-private interaction and cooperation at the local level—a reification that emerged at the turn of the 21st century in the context of the “new Europe” (Pierre, 2005). In fact, it is in line with Le Galès’ “political sociology of governance” (2017) and insists more on the importance of the power dimensions that underlie collective action rather than normative or value-based issues explaining urban policy style (Pierre, 2005; Stoker, 1998).

The reason why the governance framework fits nicely with the study of issues of urban transformation as diverse as those proposed is due to the fact that it conceptualises agency generically enough to make no prejudgment about which social actors are more relevant at the local level of the political system. An urban governance framework “simply asks who controls the resources that are critical to governing and to what extent they can sustain collective action” (Pierre, 2014, p. 868). Therefore, it allows us to account for social actors regardless of their public or private status (Paper 1), legal or illegal one (Paper 2) and the agenda that they advance (Paper 1 and Paper 3).

Given the approach inspired by political sociology, this thesis deals with the geography of urban transformation by investigating, in particular, the local mechanisms of power that drive its governance (Le Galès, 2013). This “statement of intent” comes with two clarifications.

First, the objective of increasing one’s capacity to act—a central concept in a great deal of power-informed studies (Clegg & Haugaard, 2009)—is crucial also within the body of relationships that constitute urban governance (Harding, 2009; Stone, 1989). The thesis is informed by a plural understanding of power that accounts for *power to* dynamics (i.e. an actor’s capacity to act) and the way the latter manifests either as *power with* (i.e. consensual interactions between actors) or *power over* (i.e. domination of an actor over another one) (Westin, 2022). These power dynamics are

defined not just simply in terms of who seems powerful but also, and even more importantly, in terms of how powerful relationships unfold as practices and spatialities.

Second, it is worth clarifying the urban dimension of the power relationships under study and their multiscalar nature. The concern about the “methodological trap of localism” in which it is assumed that the urban scale is “a pre-given, relatively discrete container of political-economic processes” (Brenner, 2009, p. 122) is a potential shortcoming of many studies of urban politics—see the reflection on the limits of urban regime analysis proposed in Paper 1. For instance, central state power as well as supranational one affect the mechanisms of urban governance, both directly and indirectly.

According to Jessop (2013), de-nationalisation and de-statisation are two trends that are crucially affecting urban governance. As concerns the former trend, he proposes an interpretation of the territorial dispersion of the central state’s activities in terms of hollowing out. This process would go upwards (i.e. towards international bodies) as well as downwards (i.e. towards regional or local states) and outwards (to cross-national alliances among local metropolitan or regional states).

As concerns the latter trend, de-statisation redraws the public-private divide on whatever territorial scale the state acts by including private interests in the decision-making machine. Thus, it appears that local state power should also account for “non-hierarchical forms of coordination with highly variable territorial geometries” (Jessop, 2013, p. 11).

The title of this thesis is *Exploring practices and spatialities of urban transformation: the role of power in urban governance*. The rest of this chapter adds content to each of the elements that compose the title and is structured as follows. Section two substantiates the analytical framework of making sense of urban transformation by examining the role of local mechanisms of power. Based on this, section three presents the scope of the thesis with regard to practices and spatialities. Section four explains the exploratory methodological approach used in the thesis and the implications for its empirical and theoretical parts. To conclude, section five provides an overview of the three papers in the form of abstracts.

2. The role of power in urban governance

2.1 *The framework of urban governance*

Simply defined, urban governance refers to “the development of governing styles in which boundaries between and within public and private actors have become blurred” (Stoker, 1998, p. 17)—but see Bevir (2013) for a more systematic review of governance theories.

Urban governance provides a controversial framework of analysis. On the one hand, it claims that governance could as well constitute a well-established feature of society (Pierre & Peters, 2012). On the other, this framework has been used to understand the more recent collaborative forms of governing at the local level.

Further, a recurring problem is the tendency to overlap an analytical reading of urban governance with a normative one (Pierre & Peters, 2005). Urban governance has become a buzzword, as it offers an apparently easy reading of what is perceived as increasingly complex governing issues. The common statement that there has been “a shift from government to governance” (see for instance Rhodes, 1997) is often accompanied by a normative understanding of urban governance: local governments are expected to “steer, not row” (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992).

For this reason, it becomes necessary to move away from normative assumptions around urban governance and stress out from the very beginning that this PhD thesis approaches urban governance as an analytical tool that allows to identify practices “worthy of study” within the present urban domain (Stoker, 1998, p. 18).

From a geographical perspective, an issue that deserves attention is that the domain of urban governance is distinct from that of the national or supranational level but, at the same time, interacts with those scales.

The city-region framework, for instance, has attracted considerable attention from urban and regional scholars by claiming that cities need “to be understood not solely as the medium and outcome of territorial reorganisations *internal* to the state [...] but also a decisive moment in the *internationalisation* of the state itself” (Jonas & Moisiso, 2018, p. 351, emphasis in original). This claim goes hand in hand with those of scholars arguing that “cities have become again the key engine of economic development” (Crouch & Le Galès, 2012, p. 407) and urban governments are “the

institutional forcefield through which capitalist contradictions are mediated, deflected and intensified” (Thompson, 2021, p. 8).

Given these premises, urban governance faces a renewed set of institutional, economic and political challenges in regard to the evolutionary trajectory fostered by the contemporary capitalist system and globalisation (Hambleton & Gross, 2007). This qualitatively distinguishes today’s urban governance from the “relatively self-contained national urban systems” that characterised the mid-20th century era (Jonas & Moisiu, 2018, p. 351).

It is worth noting that cities perform different functions according to the chosen observation scale. The case of the above-mentioned city-region framework is telling: Scott claims that it represents the “burgeoning phenomenon in the late 20th and early 21st century” (Scott, 2019, p. 555)—see Robinson (2006) for an alternative perspective opposed to the supposed dominance of the regional scale—but some of those city regions have acquired even the “global” qualifier (Sassen, 2001) because of their “disproportionately large and economically vibrant” dimension (Scott, 2019, p. 554).

In light of such scholarly debate and the relevance of the issue of scale, it is important to stress that this thesis focuses on the *local* mechanisms of urban governance. This is not to downplay the role of other scales and the attention that the literature has put on them. Rather, the purpose of this choice is that of shedding light on the role of the local scale with a “multiscalar mindset”, i.e. by putting “the local” in the context of the other scales.

Paper 1 and its review of the latest advancements in the study of urban regimes—a framework that has been defined “a precursor to the evolving analytical models of urban governance” (Pierre & Peters, 2012, p. 73)—offers an example of such a “multiscalar mindset”. It claims that scholars have become more aware of a multitiered set of actors that goes beyond the state-business coalitions operating at the city level and which would now govern cities in the current “post-regime” political order. This implies a focus on inter-scalar dynamics while pinpointing polycentric, multilevel, governance systems in which public and private actors interact with each other.

All these considerations make especially relevant the question of power. The more significant presence of non-state actors at different scales has, in fact, made less clear where the real loci of urban power are (Pierre & Peters, 2012). Further, since different actors are involved in the social production of power, democratic processes such as those associated with elections, transparency and accountability are less and less apt to identify the power dynamics at work (Clark & Krebs, 2012).

For these reasons, the next subsection provides a reading of power that allows us to interpret these new trends in urban governance.

2.2 Power to, power over, power with: for a plural understanding of power

As said, the concept of power is a central one in debates around urban governance. Quite simply, power is productive and constitutive of society (Flyvbjerg, 2004). Despite its ubiquity, it is also one of the most difficult concepts to make sense of in the social sciences.

Looking at the main developments of the literature on power since the 1960s—for a review, see Göhler (2009)—it appears that one of the main trajectories has been a move away from a “common sense” view of power, i.e. as essentially grounded in coercion, to “more systemic, less agent specific, perceptions of power that see it as more generally constitutive of reality” (Clegg & Haugaard, 2009, p. 3). Still, it is especially challenging to untangle the debate on power: the more new elements and nuances have been added to the picture, the more the latter has started to resemble “a muddled situation that is hard to disentangle” (Göhler, 2009, p. 28).

Drawing from Wittgenstein’s description of “family resemblance” concepts (2009), Haugaard and Lentner claim that the “elusiveness” of power (Stone, 2012, p. 11) is explained by the fact that

There is no single essence that defines the concept but there are a number of overlapping characteristics, as in a large family, which define membership. Each theory has local usage which makes sense for that theory but is not entirely applicable in a different context. (2006, p. 9)

What emerges from this short description is the challenge of incorporating the different approaches of analysis into a common definition of power.

To add even more complexity to the debate, the concept of power is particularly apt to normative judgments. Lukes, for instance, refers to power as an “essentially contested concept: one of those concepts which inevitably involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users” (2004, p. 30).

The concepts of *power over*, *power to* and *power with* offer a telling example of this aspect. Exercising *power over* within a social relation is generally considered reprehensible: it produces only a negative result for those subjected to it since it narrows their field of action (e.g. Dahl, 2005; Lukes, 2004). Conversely, the view of power as capacity for action (i.e. *power to*)—and even more so the consensual one (i.e. *power with*)—are generally treated sympathetically and some scholars added an emancipatory dimension to them (e.g. Arendt, 1970; Habermas, 1984).

However, the question remains of what interpretation of power is more suitable for the present analysis of urban governance practices. This PhD thesis opts for a plural understanding of power (Westin, 2022) that includes *power over* and *power with* within the domain of *power to* and draws on scholars who have rendered these concepts commensurable (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Haugaard, 2003; Ruggiero, 2015; Stone, 2012).

The aim is that of developing a conceptual framework that is capable of embracing an “analysis of notions of power ranging from: enabling and constraint, illegitimate as well as legitimate, conflictual and consensual as well as constitutive and repressive” (Westin, 2022, p. 136) while moving away from normative assumptions. To support this choice, Clegg et al. observe that these three dimensions of power cannot be separated as “power will always consist in a complex contingent tension between a capacity to extend freedom of some to achieve something and an ability to restrict the freedom of others in doing something or other” (2006, p. 191).

More to this point, *power to* is defined as a dispositional ability to act that derives from the reproduction of social order (Haugaard, 2003). Therefore, *power to* works to both constrain and enable actions. In other words, it is productive and “we must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms” only (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 120).

In line with this reasoning, *power over* and *power with* represent two manifestations of *power to*. *Power over* is about some actors attempting to get other actors to do what they else would not have done.

Power with refers, conversely, to consensual interactions between actors aimed at reaching a shared objective. This goes along with the idea that “procedural devices [...] should no longer be considered spaces where power is absent: quite the contrary, they are places of concerted power” (Haugaard, 2015, p. 156).

This plural interpretation of power comes in handy for the thesis. For instance, Paper 2, which deals with the infiltration of urban development by mafia groups, shows that *power with* can manifest as concerted actions between legal and illegal actors in a relational and deal-making space defined as “the grey area” of urban governance. Paper 3, instead, provides evidence of a tactical use of *power with* institutional solutions in the context of progressive urban government. Despite those institutional solutions originating from the rationale of participatory urban governance, they ended up manifesting as *power over* actions.

Finally, it should be noted that the thesis addresses both empowering processes and those of powerlessness, where the former indicates the inclusion in the process of making place-shaping decisions and the latter the process of exclusion from that process.

Paper 1 offers a telling consideration in this regard when it points out that the current scenario of urban governance offers a more fluid structure of power that accounts for a set of potential actors going beyond “the usual suspects”, e.g. the corporate sector. At the same time, it claims that actors from the lower strata usually lack the resources needed to form a governing coalition, so that regime building can be extremely difficult and affected by powerlessness dynamics.

3. A question of practices and spatialities: scope of the thesis

As said, the overall aim of the thesis is to provide a lens through which to gain a more nuanced understanding of the changing forms of collective action and the capacity to act at the local level. To do so, the thesis questions how urban

governance underpins local mechanisms of *power to*, *power with* and *power over*. Its scope encompasses the practices and spatialities of these mechanisms.

3.1 A contextual note: dealing with Italian cases and its implications

Before considering the practices and spatialities explored by the thesis, I will briefly look at the relevance of the context under investigation as for the empirical part of the thesis, i.e. the Italian urban domain.

A key aspect that Le Galès' "political sociology of governance" (2013, 2017) emphasises is that urban governance and power are deeply embedded socio-political phenomena that are influenced by the context in which they are inserted. Thus, it is worth to account for some specific aspects of the Italian political landscape that some may argue to make the empirical cases "atypical", if not outright "outliers", with regard to the issues of urban transformation, urban governance and power that the thesis deals with.

The two empirical papers explore two distinct issues of urban transformation: on the one hand, Paper 2 considers the role of criminal organisations in the production of the city; on the other, Paper 3 examines the possibility of "progressive" forces to shift agendas away from the issue of attractiveness. I argue that the contextual elements of the two cases do not make such cases "atypical" and/or "outliers".

In the case of Paper 2 there are two main specificities that should be considered: first, the presence of systemic corruption as for decision-making in urban development; second, the infiltration by organised criminal groups (OCGs)—in particular, mafias that originated in Italy—of the legal economy and, more specifically, urban development projects. The embeddedness of these two aspects within the Italian context help to explain why the Italian literature on corruption and OCG infiltration in urban development is richer than other Western countries. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily imply that the phenomena of corruption and criminal infiltration occur the way they do just in Italy. This, in fact, appears to be a bias of most of the geographical research on illegal activities in urban development, which has rarely tackled the issue of OCGs and corruption, and even less so in North American and Western European countries (Hall, 2012). Accordingly, the majority of scholars has considered the presence of OCGs and systemic corruption as an

anomaly when it occurs outside the so-called Global South (Weinstein, 2008), post-Soviet countries (Hudson, 2018) and scenarios such as Southern Italy's (Scalia, 2018) where OCGs have traditionally been embedded.

Without undermining the relevance of such specificities in Italy, I argue that there is room to consider Paper 2 as a “hyper example” of broader trajectories in urban governance and their power dynamics. As for the issue of corruption in urban development, it seems more to be a structural feature of the majority of urban planning systems rather than an Italian exception. In this regard, there is research that has pointed out that specific features of urban planning processes encourage illegal practices in order to illicitly influence a certain public decision (Chiodelli, 2019; Chiodelli & Moroni, 2015; Gardiner & Lyman, 1978).

As for the issue of the presence of mafias that originated in Italy, in Paper 2 we develop the argument that the Italian mafia problem is not anymore a peculiar Italian one. Indeed, it is a fact that Italian criminal organisations have more and more a transnational character (Sergi, 2017, 2019) and when they expand abroad they act similarly to the case examined in the paper, i.e. that of northern Italy.

In the case of Paper 3, the main specificity at play is the selection of a case study such as Padova's that is, historically, emblematic of the legacy of radical politics—e.g. autonomist Marxism—occurring between the 1970s and the 1980s and which still attracts interest by the activist literature as an “exceptional” one (Gray, 2018, 2022). This “radical” element can still somehow be traced in Padova's politics thanks to the presence of urban social movements that “descend” from such radical experience. Given the paper's attention to issues of “progressive” and “emancipatory” agendas and forces, such an historical legacy provided a potential element to account for in the analysis.

However, in Paper 3 we decided to pay attention to the relation between institutional politics and local, civil associations because it was the latter that gained momentum and was acknowledged by the local political discourse. In doing so, it succeeded in promoting, through a civic list, a “progressive” and, potentially, “emancipatory” agenda within a municipal coalition.

For this reason, the case of Padova is not an “atypical” one on an “exceptional” case of radical politics. Instead, we considered it a “critical case study” (Flyvbjerg, 2001) that we deem worthy of understanding “progressive” mid-sized cities of Western Europe overall.

3.2 Practices as “place-shaping choices”

As concerns the issue of practices, the thesis looks at power through the “place-shaping choices” (Harding, 2009, p. 32) that do not affect simply who governs but include, also, “the body of relationship over which political agents engage in ongoing struggle” (Stone, 2012, p. 12). There is, in fact, a call to research the ways in which this body of powerful relationships is defined by “practices and institutions” (Hayward, 2000, p. 176) and, relatedly, to consider the complex network of social boundaries—norms and institutions as well as discourses and rationalities—that define the field of action.

Paper 1 tackles, for instance, the “place-shaping” role of those “informal arrangements by which public bodies and private interests function together in order to be able to make and carry out governing decisions” (Stone, 1989, p. 6)—i.e. the practices of urban regime constitution. In doing so, it argues that the supposedly “unrivaled power structures” (Rast, 2015, p. 144) of these informal arrangements downplay the role of formal institutions.

Paper 3, instead, targets the discourses—i.e. “concerns, concepts, themes and types of statement” (Scott, 2014, p. 178)—that emerge from a case study of progressive urban governance. Thus, it questions “what ‘governmental rationalities’ are at work when those who govern govern” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 131) and exposes practices of progressive urban governance as a disputed terrain where “knowledge and truth are contested, and rationality [...] is exposed as a focus of conflict” (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2004, p. 52).

3.3 The production, regulation and consumption of urban space

As concerns the second issue, spatialities are here understood as both the physical components of the city—i.e. the built environment—and the “discursive space” (Lefebvre, 2013) through which local mechanisms of power manifest and are

represented. The thesis puts attention to spatialities through three processes that affect them: production, regulation and consumption.

As for the production of urban space, this thesis refers in particular to the built environment. A diverse set of actors are involved in this production: property developers and construction companies of course, but also professionals such as architects and designers among others. In this regard, urban development is a contested arena (Fainstein, 2001) with a strong territorial dimension—see Paper 2 on the importance of local production factors. For this reason, it is a process where the relevance of local mechanisms of power is particularly evident.

As well as those directly engaged in the process, there are a number of actors that are less directly involved but still just as important. This group includes investors in the built environment and its composition has changed significantly since the 1980s and challenged the exclusively local dimension of urban development—see for instance Aalbers (2020) on its financialisation.

The production of space and its increasingly multiscalar nature is an aspect that is particularly evident in regard to Paper 2. By addressing the little attention paid by spatial disciplines to the role of illegal practices and players, the paper sheds light on both the local dimension and the transnational nature of this dark side of urban development. As concerns the former, it covers mafias' role as space-shaping actors and the opportunity structure provided to them by local contexts. With regard to the latter, it considers how mafias' international profits from illegal activities can be laundered at the local level and ease their infiltration of urban development.

The regulation of urban space is the second process that the thesis considers. The urban space, in fact, is not produced without constraint: it is subject to strict control by the state through the planning system which, in turn, legitimises political decisions (Crane & Weber, 2012; Sager, 2012).

Both Paper 2 and Paper 3 put attention to the fact that the regulatory action of the state exerts, also through its shortcomings, a crucial influence on the direction of physical change in the urban landscape. Paper 2, for instance, considers the structural shortcomings of the urban planning system (Chiodelli & Moroni, 2015) to observe how they make it particularly open to illicit and illegal pressure. Paper 3,

instead, reflects on the weaknesses of communicative planning (e.g. Huxley & Yiftachel, 2000), in particular: the idea that the most effective way to ensure democratic decision-making and prevent uneven power relationships in urban development is by means of legal institutionalisation.

The third process of urban transformation covered by this thesis is that of urban consumption. Indeed, the urban landscape is not only produced and regulated, but it also serves a variety of groups and functions. In this regard, the dynamics of consumption surrounding the urban landscape have changed dramatically since the 1970s (Harvey, 1989) and it becomes important to understand the new relationships—also conflictual ones—between the groups of “consumers” of the urban landscape.

The diverse composition of these groups and their equally diverse needs—e.g. residential, commercial, industrial, retail, leisure as well as cultural and social use—is one of the central elements addressed by Paper 3. The work draws attention to a specific use of urban space inspired by the rationale of the urban commons (e.g. Eidelman & Safransky, 2021; Feinberg et al., 2021) with a twofold purpose: first, to examine a clash between exchange and use values (Lefebvre, 1996) over vacant public spaces; second, to question how institutional solutions of progressive urban governance mediate in this dispute.

4. Methodology: an explorative research

This PhD thesis is characterised by an explorative attitude as a whole: on the one hand, the two empirical papers (Paper 2 and Paper 3) deal with under-researched urban contexts of urban transformation by means of a case study methodology; on the other, the theoretical paper (Paper 1) attempts to trace novel research trajectories in urban governance theory through a longitudinal literature review.

This means that the purpose is not to achieve generalisation or comparison at all costs. As for generalisation, Flyvbjerg argues that it is “only one of the many ways by which people gain and accumulate knowledge” and that, in this regard, “a purely descriptive, phenomenological case study without any attempt to generalise can certainly be of value” (2006, p. 227). In addition, the fact that case studies provide

the researcher with an in-depth description of the nuances of the issues under study does not exclude the possibility to formulate generalisations. In this respect, Flyvbjerg refers to:

A generalisation of the sort, “if it is valid for this case, it is valid for all (or many) cases.” In its negative form, the generalisation would be, “if it is not valid for this case, then it is not valid for any (or only few) cases”. (2006, p. 230)

A similar reasoning applies to comparison. Here, again, case studies and comparative ones offer a different methodological approach in light of the same end, that of assessing a theory. In this regard, Eckstein claims that choices between the two methods are “largely governed by arbitrary or practical, rather than logical, considerations”, so that “it is impossible to take seriously the position that case study is suspect because problem-prone and comparative study deserving of benefit of doubt because problem-free” (2009, p. 234).

These considerations can be applied on different bases to the empirical papers and the theoretical one.

4.1 Implications for the empirical part

With reference to the empirical part, Paper 2 and Paper 3 adopt an in-depth qualitative approach that is based on a case study methodology (Mills et al., 2010; Yin, 2014). Here, I mention two aspects that the empirical papers share.

First, both of them opt for an information-oriented selection of “critical case studies”—i.e. cases “having strategic importance in relation to the general problem” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 229). This implies that they aim at providing a fine-grained narrative of the phenomena in question. In doing so, the use of two case studies in Paper 2 is not linked to any comparative operation; rather, they are treated in their singularity as they provide different but complementary elements for understanding grey governance mechanisms in peripheral areas. Paper 3 adopts a phronetic approach to case studying (Flyvbjerg, 2001, 2004) whose aim is not to achieve a formal generalisation of results. It offers, in fact, a reflexive discussion of the status of a given set of progressive practices of urban governance.

Second, both Paper 2 and Paper 3 include, in terms of data collection, primary sources such as semi-structured interviews and group interviews and secondary ones such as relevant official documents. However, the two papers differ with regard to the importance of the data sources.

As for Paper 2, the two case studies have been reconstructed mainly through documentary sources and, in a second stage, have been further enriched through ad hoc semi-structured interviews and group interviews. Given the criminal nature of the practices examined in Paper 2, judicial documents had a primary function in the research and allowed to outline an extremely detailed picture of the events that would otherwise have been impossible to reconstruct independently—e.g. through ethnographic work. In this case, then, interviews played more of a supplementary function, i.e. to deepen aspects of the case studies that were not included in the court documents.

The data collection of Paper 3 goes in the opposite direction. Semi-structured and group interviews with actors involved in the participatory governance arrangements played a central role in tracing the discursive formations at play. Instead, documentary sources had a supporting role and helped to build a more consistent, well-informed reenactment of the events under discussion.

4.2 Implications for the theoretical part

Paper 1 shares the aim of not reaching generalisation at all costs too. The work offers a state of the art of a well-established model of urban governance—urban regime analysis (URA). To do so, it opts for an in-depth, longitudinal literature review.

Paper 1 does not attempt to come up with a general, all-embracing definition of URA. More to the point, it does not rise higher on the ladder of abstraction (Sartori, 1970)—e.g. as to define a set of minimal criteria that allow for conceptual flexibility. In fact, the rationale of Paper 1 is that of exploring the historical development of the body of discourses that gravitates towards URA so as to indicate new possible lines of research along with their potential and limitations.

The “wave of intellectual fashion” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 30) of URA has inevitably fluctuated as a result of the changing urban contexts that it has dealt with: as a

consequence, the corpus of theoretical advancements that emerge from the literature review is a diverse one and could not be summarised under the umbrella of a common definition.

5. Overview of papers

The PhD thesis is written in the form of academic papers investigating separate issues under the umbrella of local power mechanisms in urban transformation. To conclude this introductory chapter, I outline the three papers by means of their respective abstracts.

5.1 Integrating urban politics with urban geography. Rise of the new wave of urban regime analysis in the post-regime city

Urban regime analysis (URA), a US-born school of political science that is considered a precursor to urban governance, seems to have lost its appeal because of its early Western-centric and urban-centric foci. This article claims that this may not be the case anymore. Thanks to a cross-contamination with urban geography, URA can now offer new insights and account for those diverse players that have entered the urban scene with their own particular store of resources. The article looks at the most recent concepts and analytical tools that scholars added to URA's original framework and, accordingly, provides a typology of these latest developments that draws from the categories of space, resource exchange and the network of actors at play. Building on this typology, the article pinpoints URA's case sensitivity in relation to urban contexts that resemble less and less those of the post World War II urban renewal experience in the US. It also considers the limits of this new wave of URA and argues that much of the potential of this cross-disciplinary contamination is still unexplored and the study of urban regimes would benefit from a thorough confrontation with debates in urban geography.

The paper is sole-authored and will soon be submitted to the journal *Progress in Human Geography*.

5.2 Criminal accumulation by dispossession: the exploitation of property development in peripheral areas by organised crime

The paper discusses the infiltration of mafia-type organised criminal groups (OCGs) in property development, with a particular focus on peripheral areas. It has two main aims. Firstly, to shed light on the fact that mafia-type OCGs often become active players in this industry. Secondly, to identify those place-bound aspects that foster their infiltration of real estate development. To this end, the article reviews recent cases of infiltration in the sphere of urban development with regard to the non-traditional mafia area of northern Italy. By investigating two peripheral municipalities, Brescello and Desio, it offers an insight into two main factors that make peripheral areas an attractive property market for place-embedded criminal organisations such as mafia groups: firstly, the structural weaknesses of peripheral municipalities with regard to their political-administrative spheres which, in turn, amplify the shortcomings of the planning process; secondly, the fact that the peripheral property markets present some features that make them more likely to be affected by the economic input of OCGs and thus create an ideal scenario for a process of criminal accumulation by dispossession.

The paper is co-authored by Francesco Chiodelli and has been recently published in *Territory, Politics, Governance* (DOI: 10.1080/21622671.2023.2207590).

5.3 The urban commons meet new municipalism. Power, rationality and the eventualities of progressive urbanism

The article questions in which terms the lack of regime incumbency—i.e. a consolidated governing capacity required to deliver one's agenda and succeed politically—can curb the ambitions of progressive coalition governments. It shows, in this regard, the key role played by “power over” practices that are concealed under the guise of “power with” institutional solutions and the rationales through which these power mechanisms materialise. By examining the case of Padova (Italy) and focusing on institutional solutions that blend progressive elements such the commons agenda and new-municipalist politics, the article provides a twofold

argument. First, it argues that coalition politics tends to focus on procedural aspects while hindering agenda renewal. Second, it claims that the ambiguities inherent in vocabularies such as the commons' and that of new municipalism substantially compromise their delivery. The article provides evidence of these elements by examining three conflictual instances of vacant public spaces.

The paper is co-authored by Carlo Salone and is currently under review in *Urban Geography*.

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Paper 1

Integrating urban politics with urban geography. Rise of the new wave of urban regime analysis in the post-regime city

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Abstract

Urban regime analysis (URA), a US-born school of political science that is considered a precursor to urban governance, seems to have lost its appeal because of its early Western-centric and urban-centric foci. This article claims that this may not be the case anymore. Thanks to a cross-contamination with urban geography, URA can now offer new insights and account for those diverse players that have entered the urban scene with their own particular store of resources. The article looks at the most recent concepts and analytical tools that scholars added to URA's original framework and, accordingly, provides a typology of these latest developments that draws from the categories of space, resource exchange and the network of actors at play. Building on this typology, the article pinpoints URA's case sensitivity in relation to urban contexts that resemble less and less those of the post World War II urban renewal experience in the US. It also considers the limits of this new wave of URA and argues that much of the potential of this cross-disciplinary contamination is still unexplored and the study of urban regimes would benefit from a thorough confrontation with debates in urban geography.

Keywords: urban regime; urban politics; urban geography; urban governance

1. The urban regime is dead, long live the urban regime!

Urban regime analysis (URA) has gained long-lived popularity since the publication of Stone's seminal *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1988* (1989). A US-born school of political science, URA focuses on "the informal arrangements by which public bodies and private interests function together in order to be able to make and carry out governing decisions" (Stone, 1989, p. 6). Its guiding tenet and "iron law is that for any governing arrangement to sustain itself, resources must be commensurate with the agenda being pursued" (Stone, 2015, p. 103).¹

URA's prolonged influence in urban political economy in relation to the question of who governs the city is widely acknowledged and much of the leading scholarship that has focused on issues of urban governance has dealt, directly or indirectly, with the debate on urban regimes (Nevarez, 2015; Smith, 2019). However, some scholars suggest that URA has now lost its appeal: new eras of urban governance would demand new approaches (Judd & Laslo, 2013) and the time may have come to celebrate the "academic funeral" of urban regimes (Lambelet, 2019, p. 3).

While there may be a stark difference between current trends of urban governance—for a review, see da Cruz et al. (2019) and Denters (2013)—and the post World War II redevelopment phase narrated by early urban regime scholars, it is less obvious how we should move forward theoretically as a result of it (Rast, 2015). The case of urban governance theorists is telling of this. While arguing that URA is "largely incapable of conceptualising and accounting for change" (Pierre, 2014, p. 878), they also acknowledge that the latter "could be seen as a precursor to the evolving analytical models of urban governance" (Pierre & Peters, 2012, p. 73) and is, overall, "a more sophisticated model than the urban governance framework" (Pierre, 2014, p. 878). Thus, it is still open to question how to balance the benefits against the shortcomings of adopting URA.

Given this backdrop, the article examines URA's explanatory power by questioning where it stands in the current "wave of intellectual fashion" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 30). In doing so, it appeals the verdicts of Sapotichne et al. regarding a "stunted solipsism" (2007, p. 76) and a "theoretical stagnation" (2007, p. 93) that engulfed the likes of URA. In fact, I argue that a new wave of URA is on the rise in response

to a “post-regime political order” (Rast, 2015, p. 143)—i.e. one in which “new and more diverse players with their own particular store of resources have entered the scene but have done so without a broad, coalescing agenda” (Stone, 2015, p. 115).

The article claims that URA is remedying early limitations such as its Western-centric and urban-centric foci. Thanks to a cross-contamination with urban geography, it is now exploring “new territories” such as transitional cities, postcolonial settings and peripheral areas. In doing so, it is not only challenging Western-biased divisions of labour between state and market, but also accounting for the role of unconventional actors such as non-profit organisations within a multi-level governance perspective. The article provides a typology of these advancements based on the categories of space, resources and the network of actors at play.²

The rest of the article is structured as follows. Section two identifies two early waves that characterise the debate on URA and outlines the theoretical gaps that they respectively challenge. Section three explains the in-depth literature review pursued by the article and details the selection of academic references with regard to the most recent developments in the study of urban regimes. This sets the scene for section four, which advances a typology of the new wave of URA with the aim to pinpoint URA’s case sensitivity in relation to a “post-regime” urban scenario. The final section considers the limits of this new wave of URA and claims that much of the potential of this cross-disciplinary contamination is still unexplored and the study of urban regimes would benefit from a thorough confrontation with debates in urban geography.

2. URA 1.0 and 2.0: two stages in the academic debate on urban regimes

This section suggests a longitudinal reading that identifies the continuities and discontinuities of URA’s variations since it joined the scholarly debate in the mid-1980s. I start setting the scene by outlining this evolution and identifying two main stages that I label as “URA 1.0” and “URA 2.0” (see Figure 1). The first subsection reviews the rise of Stone’s approach (URA 1.0). The second one looks at the “friendly critics” (Camou, 2014, p. 628) that led to a second wave of urban

regime analysis (URA 2.0) while pointing out some limitations of URA that are now being addressed by the new wave of “URA 3.0”.

The picture that emerges is that of a political economy approach with strong US-based “ethnocentric assumptions” (Stoker & Mossberger, 1994, p. 208) that, nonetheless, succeeded to extend its intellectual appeal to Western Europe by adjusting some of its original limitations with regard to issues of agency and structure.

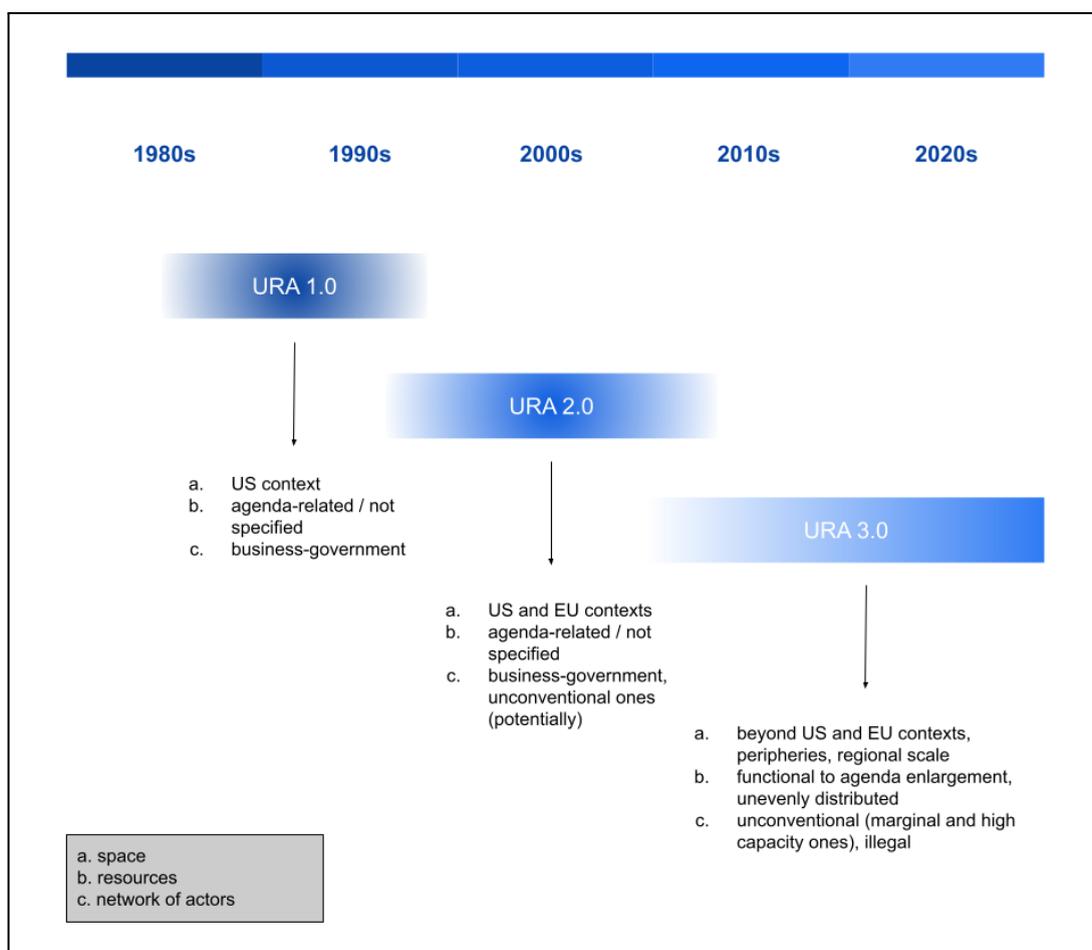


Figure 1 – The three main waves of academic debate on urban regime analysis (URA). Elaboration by the author.

2.1 URA 1.0 and the advent of Stone’s dominant path of regime analysis

For over three decades now, URA has been one of the most prevalent approaches to the study of urban governance. URA’s appeal derives from its ability to provide a

political economy reading that resolves prior debates over elitism (Hunter, 1990), pluralism (Dahl, 2005) and economic determinism (Peterson, 1981) through “a hard-nosed assessment” of the public-private arrangements that inform decision-making at the level of urban government (Jones-Correa & Wong, 2015, p. 1).³

The context where URA was elaborated is that of urban renewal in the US during the late 1970s and the 1980s, when cities experienced economic restructuring and dramatic cuts in intergovernmental aid. Here, two early variations of “URA 1.0” appear in the works of Fainstein & Fainstein (1983) and Elkin (1987) and stress the relevance of informal relationships between local governments and private actors. They do so by considering issues of social movement demands and representative democracy as a relevant part of the picture.

In Fainstein & Fainstein’s case, they examine the possibility of city governments negotiating not only between the demands of electoral politics and the forces of capital, but also those of social movements. In Elkin’s one, the focus is even more explicitly normative on how to revitalise local democratic political institutions and citizenship within a “commercial republic” regime, so that a regime’s economic development policy does not stop at corporate interests.

However, it is Stone’s narrative of Atlanta that has become “the dominant path of regime analysis” (Sapotichne et al., 2007, p. 102). Stone’s version of “URA 1.0”, unlike its two earlier counterparts, has a more explicit focus on collaboration between business and government. Economics is acknowledged as the driving force of urban governance while stressing that “the need for some form of public-private cooperation exists in all advanced capitalist societies” (Stoker & Mossberger, 1994, p. 196). This translates into a particular attention to those actors “with access to institutional resources”, which enable them “to have a sustained role in making governing decisions” (Stone, 1989, p. 4, emphasis in original).

It is important to stress how Stone’s approach to URA does not preemptively exclude the possibility to mobilise other types of governing coalitions such as those suggested by Fainstein & Fainstein and Elkin—see for instance his reflection on “middle-class progressive regimes” and “lower-class opportunity expansion” ones

(Stone, 1993, pp. 19, 20). What is stressed are, instead, the difficulties to sustain alternative, progressive, agendas and the presence of actors different from economically powerful ones.

As said, the narrative presented by *Regime Politics* has become the prototype for URA. In this regard, the literature that developed in the US starting from the 1980s and based on the rise of so-called “black urban regimes”—i.e. African-American municipal leaderships—represents one of the most straightforward elaborations of Stone’s work that still persists in recent years (Owens et al., 2021).

Arena’s provoking *Driven from New Orleans: How Nonprofits Betray Public Housing and Promote Privatization* (2012) gives a telling example of how it is possible to adopt URA while avoiding being “meta” and studying solely the role of corporate actors in municipal decision-making. Combining archival research with participant-observation data of grassroots protest, the work offers insight on the crucial role of New Orleans’ non-profit organisations “in shifting energies from protest to partnerships” (Pattillo, 2013, p. 563)—an aspect that I will further consider as for the developments of URA 3.0. This supported the rise of a business-oriented pro-growth development model” (Arena, 2015, p. 1) and, accordingly, of an urban regime.

Furthermore, the work provides evidence of the possibility to blend URA with an urban geography perspective. In this regard, Arena draws from Harvey’s theory of “accumulation by dispossession” of the urban space (2013) to frame the demolition of New Orleans’ public housing “through the redistribution of wealth and income upward from the working class to the capitalist class rather than the generation of new wealth through the exploitation of labor and extraction of surplus value” (2012, p. 187).

2.2 URA 2.0 and its friendly critics: building momentum and expanding the realm of urban regimes

In response to “URA 1.0” and the early formulations of regime typologies that followed it (Stoker and Mossberger, 1994), a stream of “friendly critics” (Camou, 2014, p. 628) emerged at the turn of the twentieth century and led to the surge of a second wave of URA.

Two dilemmas informed the debate. First, there was the question of how to overcome the US-based assumptions of “URA 1.0” and apply the approach to other contexts, so as to ensure cross-national comparison (Savitch & Kantor, 2004). Second, there was the aspect of how to address agendas that do not pertain to business-government arrangements and, normatively, how civic capacity can “devise and employ formal and informal mechanisms to collectively solve problems” within an urban regime (Stone, 2001, p. 27).

2.2.1 URA vis à vis the urban governance framework

The first stream of “URA 2.0” emerged as a reflection of the effects of globalisation, especially on the way it was affecting western European countries at the turn of the millennium. In doing so, it drew from the urban governance framework and its ability to conceptualise agency generically enough to make no prejudgment about which social actors are more relevant at the local level of the political system (Pierre, 2014).⁴

According to many urban scholars, globalisation was producing increased competition at the local and regional levels on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean (Sellers, 2002). This raised the possibility of similar trends as the ones that were already occurring in the US—e.g. the declining role of nation states, the rising impact of privatisation and market mechanisms on society, the rise of public-private partnerships advocated by governments and, more in general, the rise of neoliberal tendencies (Blanco, 2015).

This aspect, along with the belief that “comparison can also strengthen theory, using a larger canvas to portray, isolate and explain the causes and consequences of similarities and differences between cities” (Mossberger, 2009, p. 45), facilitated a conceptual relaxation over what constitutes an urban regime.

Minimalistic definitions became popular, particularly among scholars working on western European contexts and who have been less strict in their application of the concept. This tendency led them to focus on URA’s “iron law” while overlooking the issue of longevity of cooperation: i.e. the need for “a longstanding pattern of cooperation rather than a temporary coalition” (Mossberger & Stoker, 2001, p. 829).

Importantly, such a “governance-friendly” approach allowed regime scholars to expand on the issue of agency and gave substance to the openness of URA towards a variety of agendas—an aspect that differentiates URA from more circumscribed political economy approaches such as the growth machine one (Molotch, 1976).⁵

Looking at the latest developments that have been recently fostered by the new wave of “URA 3.0”, we can even argue that the “concept stretching” (Mossberger & Stoker, 2001, p. 817) embedded in this stream of “URA 2.0” was much needed not only to account for the widened realm of agency that came with western European institutional contexts—see for instance how URA was applied to the Italian context and cities as different as Milan (Conte, 2021; Vicari & Molotch, 1990), Turin (Belligni & Ravazzi, 2012), Naples (Vitellio, 2009) and Rome (D’Albergo & Moini, 2015). “Relaxing” on the issue of agency has, in fact, allowed to broaden URA’s urban-centric focus on “the usual suspects” and consider instead the multiscalar, multi-level dimension of urban regimes while suggesting a change of language from “the urban” to “the metropolitan” (Hamilton, 2002).

2.2.2 URA vis à vis regulation theory

The second stream of “URA 2.0” also deals with the possibility of alternative urban regimes, but does so by expanding the urban regime framework on the issue of structure while revisiting Marxian political economy and, especially, regulation theory. Drawing from works such as those of Lauria (1997) and Jessop (1997), the structuralist critique of “URA 1.0” invokes the need to move beyond middle-level abstractions that leave URA “too focused on the *internal* political-economic dynamics of the city” (Imbroscio, 1998, p. 234, emphasis in original).

This critique targets a constitutive feature of URA—i.e. the fact of being attractive at a meso-level of theory building, so that it constitutively “does not offer a comprehensive approach to the political economy of urban politics” (Stoker & Mossberger, 1994, p. 199). Scholars working from a regulation theory perspective claim, in fact, the need to reconsider the division of labour between state and market as it manifests in cities of capitalist democracies, so to regard the latter as the object of struggle instead of a mere fact (Imbroscio, 1998).

Such an approach comes with a clear normative understanding of political practice that is closer to the perspective of activist scholars and aims at overcoming Stone's "meta" reading of URA. In fact, it refers to Elkin's earlier version as a better reference "to provide the city with a more legitimate form of accumulation" and, accordingly, "to inform the work of activists struggling to remake the city in a more democratic image" (Imbroscio, 1998, pp. 244, 245).

Looking at the evolution of URA as a whole, a valuable contribution of the structuralist critique is that it spotlights the issue of regime change. Against the tendency of *Regime Politics* to focus on regime stability and the self-reinforcing modes that favour it (Rast, 2015; Ravazzi & Belligni, 2016)—i.e. a priority agenda, a wide array of complementary resources and a mode of cooperation that allows negotiations (Stone, 2015)—the structuralist critique sheds light on the issues of regime transition and regime resistance. Whether it comes "from pro- or anti-systemic forces", regime resistance is deemed "co-constitutive of regime outcomes and potentially an enhancing or depleting factor on governing resources. Regime power is thus conceived as a continuous struggle over governability" (Bua & Davies, 2022, p. 5).

Given these considerations, it is possible to claim that such a "regulationist" approach has pointed out a key limitation of URA that has been further examined by the new wave of "URA 3.0". Indeed, when arguing against a too rigid understanding of the division of labour between state and market, these scholars are implicitly suggesting to move beyond the Western-centric assumptions of such divide. More to this point, we can argue that despite living in a homogenised, postpolitical (neoliberal) city—i.e. one where policy agendas focus on projects that aim to make cities more "attractive", "smart" or "sustainable" (Davidson & Iveson, 2015)—market and state forces do not "operate according to immutable laws no matter where they are unleashed" (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, p. 351).

As said, this aspect has been further explored by more recent studies of urban regimes that, accordingly, have started to look at non-Western contexts such as the Global Easts' and consider cities where "the blurred boundary of the political and

economic dimensions of urban growth is enabled by immature market conditions and state controlled resources” (Sun & Huang, 2016, p. 918).

3. A methodological note: searching for the new wave of URA

The evolution of URA did not stop at the theoretical contributions offered by “URA 2.0”. The most recent literature suggests, in fact, that a new wave of URA may have arisen.

The foundation of the proposed typology of the new wave of URA is an in-depth review of the most recent literature on the theoretical status of urban regimes.

Sapotichne et al.’s article *Is urban politics a black hole?* (2007) was purposely selected as the divide between “URA 2.0” and the current new wave because of its relevance in the scholarly debate. According to the Web of Science™ metrics, which account for article usage tracking since 2016, the work has been consistently cited in human geography and political science journals (57 times up to January 2023), not to mention that a number of articles that I reviewed make explicit reference to *Is urban politics a black hole?* when tackling the theoretical status of URA (Fortner, 2016; Hankins, 2015; Lambelet, 2019; Rast, 2015; Stone, 2015).

Thus, the aim of the review is to systematise the corpus of the theoretical advancements that have accumulated in regard to URA in the last fifteen years, so to establish to what degree the 3.0 wave represents a discontinuity in relation to the previous “1.0” and “2.0” ones.

In light of choosing the relevant literature based on the length and depth of the conceptual discussion at stake, the sampling method selectively examined and cross-checked two types of datasources.

First, I launched a bibliometric search using the Web of Science™ and created a collection of studies with publications available up to January 2023, filtered by subject area (social sciences), document type (articles, book chapters, books) and language (English). The queries to the database included a combination of keywords that account for the different understandings of the theoretical status of URA and the related interpretations suggested by scholars. More to the point, the terms “theory”,

“approach”, “framework” and “paradigm” were combined with “urban regime” and used as entries for a research on article title, abstract and keywords.

Second, the research was complemented with a similar enquiry on Google Scholar to identify other relevant documents that were not indexed on Web of Science™.

The outcomes of these queries were combined and then all the abstracts, synopses and executive summaries were reviewed in order to exclude publications that were not relevant for this study. At the end of this process, around 30 documents were analysed in depth.

It is worth stressing that the resulting typology that I present in the following section (see also Figure 2) does not follow the approach of rising higher on the ladder of abstraction as in earlier elaborations of “URA 2.0”—e.g. Stoker and Mossberger’s (2001) attempt to define a set of minimal criteria that allow for conceptual flexibility. Instead of providing a more comprehensive definition aimed at uniting the different interpretations of urban regimes, the article suggests an analytical step backwards. Thus, it identifies the similarities and dissimilarities on the level of conceptualisation of the “new wave of URA” so as to pay attention to the historical development of the body of discourse that gravitates towards urban regimes.

4. Expanding on space, resources and network: urban regimes strike back

The discussion on the revival in the fortunes of URA starts with Section 4.1, which summarises where “URA 1.0” and “URA 2.0” stand as concerns the issues of space, resources and the network of actors at play. This allows to put the novelty of “URA 3.0” in a more balanced perspective through Section 4.2. Here, I consider the main contributions that enriched URA and their potential to account for a “post-regime” urban scenario by incorporating elements from urban geography.

4.1 Circumscribed understanding of the urban in “URA 1.0” and “URA 2.0”

The circumscribed understanding of “the urban” represents a constitutive limit of URA’s original framework and one that is acknowledged also by Stone when he admits that “while by no means ignoring context, *Regime Politics* gave special attention to [the] internal dynamics” of the city (Stone, 2015, p. 102).

The three dimensions of space, resource exchange and network of actors offer insight into such meso-level understanding that informs “URA 1.0” especially, but also “URA 2.0”.

First, both draw attention to the city core. The latter is the hotspot of regime politics as it provides the scenario that better expresses the magnitude of public-private arrangements and the mutual benefits that the two counterparts share. The *Triumph of the City* (Glaeser, 2011) and its wealth (Glaeser & Gottlieb, 2009) represents a telling example of this and goes hand in hand with agglomeration economies and how the latter find their ideal terrain in such densely networked urban contexts.

Phelps summarises this aspect by claiming that “as academics we are familiar with celebrating the dynamism of cities and comfortable with focusing a good deal of our analytical attention on aspects of change [...] on the city *proper*” (2012, p. 692, emphasis in original).

The resource criterion represents the second defining aspect of URA’s understanding of the urban. In Stone’s words, “the key question is about what resources are needed and who will be motivated to provide them” (2005, p. 329). However, this reading comes with a shortcoming: the URA framework, in fact, does not explain what resources are relevant.

For instance, Lambelet points out that some comparative studies that were conducted during the “URA 2.0” era “have used the term regime to designate public-private relationships in city governance, but without specifying resources exchange [...]. Others have used the term resources to refer to contextual variables influencing the bargaining position of cities in a globalized context instead of referring to arrangements and exchanges made within a governing coalition” (2019, pp. 1407–1408).

Finally, the third dimension through which to test URA’s understanding of “the urban” is the issue of which actors have the capability to establish an urban regime and how they do so. Both “URA 1.0” and “URA 2.0” display a discernible bias towards, first, informal arrangements and, second, the “usual suspects” (i.e. business and local government actors) that negotiate those arrangements.

4.2 Rise of the new wave of URA in the post-regime city

Given the stands of “URA 1.0” and “URA 2.0” on the issues of space, resource exchange and actor network, I advance a categorisation of the latest developments in the field of regime politics that, while accounting for a “post-regime political order” (Rast, 2015, p. 143), stresses how it incorporates different analytical developments, concepts and theories from the discipline of urban geography. The main features of this typology are summarised in Figure 2.

The fact that the current phase of city politics is significantly different from the “public and corporate behavior and strategies that were typical to the industrial era in the United States” is largely undisputed (Pierre, 2014, p. 864). Even those scholars who support the appropriateness of URA to the present times are willing to acknowledge that “old patterns of power have limited footing in the postindustrial city of today” (Stone, 2015, p. 115).

This is coupled with the tendency by the traditional movers and shakers of regime coalitions and pro-growth agendas to become less engaged. As a result, “priority setting is now rarely a matter of fixing a strategic direction backed by a stable circle of top leaders; it seems more often a matter of ad hoc initiatives based on opportunistic assemblages of resources” (Stone, 2015, p. 111).

Given that the odds for building an urban regime in the present post-regime scenario are much more challenging, what is open to question is how to fit the URA framework into this urban order. I identify specific challenges that are being addressed by “URA 3.0” as concerns the issues of space, the resources being exchanged and the actor network. In this regard, I point out novel readings that borrow and interact with debates in urban geography.

4.2.1 Expanding on the issue of space

“URA 1.0” and “URA 2.0” come with a circumscribed understanding of city space: they deal almost exclusively with Western contexts and focus on the dynamics that occur within the administrative boundaries of the city core. Theoretical advancements on the issue of urban space challenge this perspective on different levels and I identify two main research trajectories in this regard.

<i>The new wave of urban regime analysis (URA 3.0)</i>		
Defining category	Approach type	Main analytical developments, concepts and theories involved
Space	Post-colonial	Political sociospatial dialectic, provincialising critical urban theory, transitional societies, state-market division of labour
	Accounting for peripheries	Edge cities, technoburbs, postsuburban settlements, political sociospatial dialectic
Resources	Transitioning from agenda-based to resource-based regime typologies	Agenda enlargement strategies, private-public vs. public-private regimes
	The intergovernmental dimension of URA	Polycentricity, metropolitan systems, regulatory narratives
Network of actors	The role of unconventional actors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Marginal actors - High capacity actors 	American political development theory (APD), multitiered coalitions, community development regimes
	The illegal dimension of URA	Illegal actors, corruption, parallel dark regimes, illegal regimes

Figure 2 – A threefold typology of the “new wave of urban regime analysis” (URA 3.0). Elaboration by the author.

The first one addresses the need to explore URA’s potential to make and remake spaces in the city beyond the thoroughly investigated geographical settings of the US and western Europe.

This research trajectory considers, then, postcolonial settings (Chang et al., 2021) and the concept of “transitional societies” (Bae & Sellers, 2007; He, 2007)—i.e. contexts where “growth politics is shaped by immature market conditions, state controlled resources, dual source of political legitimacy, and infrastructural power at the base level” (Sun & Huang, 2016, p. 918)—as a means to challenge those readings based on a rigid division of labour between state and market (Imbroscio, 1998) that does not account for diverse political economies such as those of cities in the Global South and East.

The recent work of Chang et al. on *The smart city as a strategy for urban regime transition* (2021) offers a telling example in this direction. Building on the concept of “smart urbanism” as a global urban type in which cities of the Global North represent “the norm”, the work deals with the case study of Taipei and argues that mainstream understandings of the urban may “obscure emerging new power dynamics and locally contextualised processes [...], especially in cities at the global periphery” (2021, p. 559). In this regard, the case of Taipei offers insight into how the “smart city” urban type is deployed as a strategic element that allows the local state (along with its development agenda) to enact a regime transition and overcome the legacy of Taiwan’s authoritarian developmental state.

The second trajectory aims at shifting the attention of URA away from the city core. This leads to the adoption of URA with regard to the city’s peripheries, which represent “settlements that might be considered fully urban in function” and, as a consequence of that, “more likely to be characterized by regime-style politics” (Phelps, 2012, p. 673).

The use of the plural refers to the different meanings ascribed to what constitutes the peripheral—e.g. edge cities (Garreau, 1991), technoburbs (Fishman, 1987) and postsuburban settlements (Phelps & Wood, 2011). This aspect, along with an appreciation that these settlements may “have already passed through several cycles of redevelopment and may have experienced associated shifts in urban politics” (Phelps, 2012, p. 671), allows to identify a postsuburban urban regime type in which a more subtle balance between growth ideologies and residential suburban sensibilities is being struck.

4.2.2 Expanding on the issue of resource exchange

Theoretical advancements on the issue of resource exchange elaborate on the need to move beyond traditional agenda-based typologies of urban regimes, e.g. Stoker’s and Mossberger’s standard (1994).

As said, URA 1.0 and 2.0 do not specify which resources have to be exchanged to form coalitions, so that it is not clear whether some of them give more power to their holders than others and how they affect power relations within the network of actors.

Thus, the common denominator of this research trajectory is that of investigating urban regimes as a resource-based endeavour: i.e. how recurring patterns of resource exchange affect a regime policy agenda by producing a certain policy output.

For instance, according to Lambelet (2019), key aspects that define a resource-based typology are the following: first, who brings which resource to the coalition; second, who holds the most influential position in the coalition; third, how the coalition deals with groups that oppose its projects.

The scholar offers evidence of these mechanisms in his work *Filling in the Resource Gap of Urban Regime Analysis to Make It Travel in Time and Space* (2019), in which he draws on evidence from the cities of Zurich and Bern. In both cases “the realization of major urban projects relied on strong public-private cooperation structured around the mobilization and exchange of five resources: land, law, money, expertise and democratic support” (2019, p. 1402). However, the question of who is “in charge” of such resources and, thus, leads the regime cannot be taken for granted. The research, in fact, reveals starkly different patterns of resource exchange: in the case of Zurich, it is business actors that initiate projects thanks to their land and financial resources and their construction expertise; in that of Bern, it is instead the local government that takes the initiative and holds most of the resources.

This research line takes into explicit consideration the “post-regime” urban scenario. In particular, the need to account for contexts where regime agendas are more flexible and adaptable than Atlanta’s postwar, urban renewal one since “new and more diverse players with their own particular store of resources have entered the scene but have done so without a broad, coalescing agenda” (Stone, 2015, p. 115). In these contexts, the dimension of coalitional power would be much more dynamic and part of a “complex dance between institutional change and policy change” (Sapotichne & Jones, 2012, p. 442).

A recurring topic emerges with regard to the issue of expanding on resource exchange, i.e. that of the strategies of agenda enlargement. In this regard, Ravazzi and Belligni invoke a “process perspective on decisional mechanisms” and policy-making processes that allow a revised agenda to emerge and be implemented

(Ravazzi & Belligni, 2016, p. 326). Changes “on the run” to a coalition agenda would emerge when an established regime is challenged by social changes. It becomes key, then, for the regime to cope and come to terms with opposition. Lambelet’s study of agenda enlargement strategies in Bern and Zurich is telling of these aspects:

After having formed around the pursuit of a clear-cut progrowth agenda [...] both coalitions have slightly enlarged their agenda in subsequent projects by including parks, percentages of affordable housing or by organizing participatory planning with inhabitants. However, these adaptations were rather ways of securing victories in popular ballots to keep enough democratic support. (2019, p. 1422)

4.2.3 Expanding on the issue of the actor network

The third stream investigates the increasing diversity of actors that populate regime coalitions in the post-regime urban context and, in particular, those actors that have been overlooked. Contributions with regard to this stream are part of a wider refashioning of URA: they recall the urban geography issue of the multiscalar nature of urban governance relations and the need to overcome the “localist trap” in which it is assumed that the urban scale is “a pre-given, relatively discrete container of political-economic processes” (Brenner, 2009, p. 122)

For instance, central state power as well as supranational one affect the mechanisms of urban regimes, both directly and indirectly—see Jessop (2013) on the effects of de-nationalisation and de-statisation. Accordingly, regime scholars have started considering a “multitiered” reading of urban politics (Stone, 2015). Research on these aspects include three main trajectories.

The first one questions the intergovernmental dimension of urban regimes (Hamilton, 2002) while suggesting a change of language from “the urban” to “the metropolitan” and re-evaluating the role of the central state (Burns, 2003; Morel, 2018). Indeed, “just as urban planning has been expanded to regional planning, [...] the urban regime itself is best expanded to the regional level” (Thiers et al., 2018, p. 1024).

In this regard, Thiers et al’s work on *Metropolitan Eco-Regimes and Differing State Policy Environments* (2018) examines the role of state government policy in shaping

and supporting different regimes by comparing the cases of Portland and Vancouver. Adopting a multi-level analysis of the various public and private actors involved, he offers evidence of the relevance of two different “narratives of environmental governance in the two regimes” (2018, p. 1027). In particular, he argues that an urban regime may be able to re-narrate state policy and accommodate progressive values (i.e. the “eco-regime”), but the stability of such re-narration is constrained by “the institutional realities established and maintained by state-level authority” (2018, p. 1054).

The second research trajectory as concerns the actor network attempts to reinvigorate previous works from “URA 2.0” with regard to expanding research beyond the role of business actors. Accordingly, it investigates the role of lower strata (e.g. neighbourhood organisations, labour movements and immigrant groups) as well as unconventional actors with more resources at their disposal (e.g. non-profit foundations) in the building and disruption of urban regimes.

Because of the resource issue, the role of these two groups of actors within the urban regime is different. In the case of actors that are marginal to regime politics, their presence cannot translate into an outright displacement of elite politics: despite “they may not direct policy for the city as a whole, [...] the actions of these actors accrete over time, shaping local environments over years” (Jones-Correa & Wong, 2015, p. 169).

The case of better-off actors such as high capacity non-profits and anchor institutions of the likes of hospitals, universities and faith-based organisations is different (Nickels et al., 2020). In this case, they may even constitute a collaboration network with foundations and state actors. This would contribute to the rise of community development regimes as a means “of responding to existential threats posed by urgent challenges in their cities” (Harris, 2016, p. 138).

Finally, there is an emerging body of work that moves beyond the realm of legal actors and practices and considers instead the illegal dimension of urban regimes.

By “moving away from a rhetoric of gentlemanly urban capitalism and politics” (Chioldelli & Gentili, 2021, p. 1) some scholars have started to include illegal actors and practices as a constitutive, although under-researched, part of URA and point

out the existence of urban regimes of the likes of “parallel dark” and outright illegal ones. Empirical evidence in this regard is especially effective at outlining the limits of traditional agenda-based typologies. The latter, in fact, cannot account for urban regimes that are “not devoted primarily to addressing policy problems in order to favour a development agenda, but rather—and more ambitiously—to establishing a long-lasting control and manipulation of certain public sectors and processes” (Chiodelli & Gentili, 2021, p. 8).

Also the issue of urban regime change is not immune from illegal actors and practices. The work of Keiser discusses this very aspect. More to the point, how illegal practices such as corruption represent an endogenous factor for regime change that occur “with greater frequency” than other possible turning-point elements such as a fiscal crisis (2015, p. 508).

5. Relevance of urban geography to the new wave of URA and its limits

It seems that the age of urban regimes, as once understood, has now yielded to freshly reconfigured ways of how cities are governed. If so, this is not a matter of regret but simply a new chapter in a continuing effort to understand the ever-changing intricacies of how local political orders take shape and continue to change. (Stone, 2015, p. 125)

In the social sciences there is no such thing as all-encompassing, everlasting theories with the robustness of a Kuhnian scientific revolution and URA is no exception in this regard. Similarly to what happened to other research trajectories, it appears that also URA has gone through “periods where various constellations of power and waves of intellectual fashion dominate, and where a change from one period to another [...] actually consists of the researchers within a given area abandoning a dying wave for a growing one” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 30).

This article claimed that such “waves of intellectual fashion” have inevitably fluctuated as a result of the changing “local political orders” that URA has dealt with during the last four decades. In this sense, URA—at least in its earliest version as “URA 1.0”—may have, indeed, lost its explanatory power.

However, this article also argued that recently, thanks to an evolution in a geographical sense, URA has started adapting to the current “post-regime” urban

scenarios. By questioning “how can urban regime analysis use geography?”, we provided a different perspective on an issue, that of “contaminating” urban politics with urban geography, that has already been studied by Hankins’ recent *Regime Politics in Geography* (2015). The latter, in fact, asked the “opposite” question: “how can geography use urban regime analysis?”.

Hankins paid special attention to the issue the machinations of the “political socio-spatial dialectic” (Soja, 2010)—i.e. the idea that where actors, resources and infrastructure are spatially located “shapes to a meaningful but not determinant degree political life and outcomes in the city” (2015, p. 153)—and answered the question by calling geographers “to examine the *spaces* produced by these regimes and the *politics* in turn produced by those spaces” (2015, p. 156, emphasis in original).

Conversely, we argued that regime politics can, and is, using urban geography to amend on issues of agency and structure and thus shows a twofold potential: first, to move beyond Western contexts, second, to address URA’s early urban-centric focus. As concerns the first aspect, URA has imported analytical developments from the field of urban geography such as those of “provincialising critical urban theory” (Sheppard et al., 2013). In applying regime politics to transitional cities of the Global Easts such as China, South Korea and Taiwan—i.e. cities where “growth politics is shaped by immature market conditions, state controlled resources, dual source of political legitimacy, and infrastructural power at the base level” (Sun & Huang, 2016, p. 918)—URA has started “a serious engagement with both mainstream and critical Anglophone urban theory, challenging the seeming naturalness of knowledge claims through rigorous theoretical and empirical scrutiny from the standpoint of peripheral perspectives located outside the core” (Leitner & Sheppard, 2016, p. 228).

Such an attempt goes hand in hand with the aim of taking into account the contextual embeddedness of “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner & Theodore, 2002), so to challenge the idea that global urban types such as the “attractive”, “smart” or “sustainable” city (Davidson & Iveson, 2015) “operate according to immutable laws no matter where they are unleashed” (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, p.

351). Instead, works such as Chang et al.'s (2021) on the “smart city” as a strategy for urban regime transition offer evidence that URA can provide insight not only on the local politics of such agendas, but also on their paradoxical role as both perpetuating Western cultural hegemony (and remaining legible within it) and seeking to contest and subvert it.

The second aspect, i.e. URA's limited understanding of urban space, has been addressed by recent studies that seem to tackle “URA 1.0” lack of a comprehensive approach to the political economy of urban politics (Davies, 2002). Earlier contributions by “URA 2.0” scholars were crucial in this regard, as they first pointed out a fruitful solution in URA's complementarity to regulationist approaches.

Scholars from the third wave of URA seem to have gone further though. Works such as those of Thiers et al. (2018) shed light on the variety of urban politics across metropolitan systems and suggest to focus on inter-scalar dynamics. They draw from the idea of multi-tiered regime systems in which public and private actors range from local to state level and interact with each other to constitute different forms of polycentricity within which local urban regimes operate.

It seems that research going in this direction is addressing concerns with regard to the need to rescaling governmental and political relationships and is importing from geographical works on “flat ontologies” (Massey, 2005) that reject a hierarchy of nested scales ranging from “the global” to “the local”. Instead, urban regimes would represent scales that are “perpetually redefined, contested, and restructured” (Swyngedouw, 1997, p. 141) and “relations that stretch across mere localities to wider territories and imaginaries and discourses” (Hankins, 2015, p. 153).

Overall, we outlined the relevance of “URA 3.0” beyond its original field—political science—and towards that of urban geography. Regime scholars are positive about the fortunes of URA. Burns, for instance, predicts that “in 2039, [...] regime analysis, in some form or another, will continue to occupy an important space in the research of urban areas” (2015, p. 100).

We advance a more cautious vision in this regard, as the latest developments of the new wave of URA appear not to have fully realised the potential of a thorough confrontation with debates in urban geography.

The still limited number of works that are overcoming URA's original Western-centric focus and looking, instead, "elsewhere" is especially telling. Although promising, it seems that "URA 3.0" has only scratched the surface so far of the actual potential of expanding on provincialising and post-colonial theories. URA is, after all, not quite dead yet. Still, the future remains unwritten as for whether URA will be capable of fully reimagining itself by exploiting the potential of a cross-disciplinary contamination with urban geography.

Notes

1. Although some scholars refer to URA as a theory, its ontological status is a disputed one and even URA's godfather, Stone, is sceptical about labelling it an all-round theory. He leans, instead, towards the alternative wording of "urban regime analysis" by warning that "by its very nature, it has limited potential for generalizability" and that such analysis "can never produce a neat formula of explanation to apply universally" (Stone, 2015, p. 124). This article follows suit: it considers URA a framework that does not have "the sophistication of theory" (Pierre, 2014, p. 878) but, rather, presents "several variations [...] with somewhat different purposes" (Mossberger, 2009, p. 40).

2. It should be noted that the selection of space, resources and network of actors as the three categories describing the evolution of URA derives from the articles that were reviewed and thus represents "the state of things". In other words, it is a typology that draws from the internal debate on URA and not from an external assessment by urban geographers. The categories suggested in the typology are justified not only by a need for synthesis of the novelties that emerged from the literature review, but also by their relevance as concerns the urban regime framework. Indeed, urban space is the very empirical reality that is investigated by URA and the issues of resource exchange and the network of public-private actors involved in it form the constitutive elements of its "iron law".

3. Elitism and pluralism are both part of the community power debate—i.e. "arguments about how and by whom power is exerted in local democratic polities" (Scott, 2014, p. 105)—that between the 1950s and 1960s monopolised the urban politics field in the US. The elitist view, exemplified by Hunter's classic *Community Power Structure* (1990), is that power is concentrated in the hand of the few and is manifest in the way a small group of business leaders dominate decision-making in public policies. Pluralists reject this view. In his classic *Who Governs* (2005), Dahl argues that differently constituted interest groups rule depending on the issue in question in light of a "polyarchal democracy". Public choice theory is exemplified by Peterson's *City Limits* (1981) and his refutation to the entire debate over community power. Through a view inspired by economic determinism and

devolution urban policy of the 1970s and 1980s, he puts attention instead to a city's position within the national economy and the increasing competition among cities (Fortner, 2016).

4. Urban governance refers to “the development of governing styles in which boundaries between and within public and private actors have become blurred” (Stoker, 1998, p. 17)—but see Bevir (2013) for a more systematic review of governance theories. Urban governance provides a framework of analysis that accounts for two major aspects of local government. First, it argues that the local state remains a key player and governance itself could as well constitute a well-established feature of society (Pierre & Peters, 2012). Second, it allows us to understand the incentives, but also the challenges, related to more recent collaborative forms of governing at the local level— i.e. “the politics of the subnational level” (Mossberger et al., 2012, p. 4).

5. Urban growth machine is an influential thesis of urban politics suggesting that the objective of growth unites otherwise pluralistic interests in relation to a city. It was originally elaborated in the 1970s thanks to the work of Molotch on *The city as a growth machine* (1976) and it intersects with other theories of urban politics—such as urban regime theory—in its suggestion that elite coalitions tend to have an overwhelming influence on the politics of cities. The growth machine thesis is distinct, however, by not only pinpointing particularly powerful actors and organisations, but also emphasising their common motivation for urban growth. Thus, while acknowledging that a plurality of interests make up political power in cities, growth is forwarded as that which binds actors and organisations together (Rodgers, 2009).

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Criminal accumulation by dispossession: the exploitation of property development in peripheral areas by organised crime

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Abstract

The paper discusses the infiltration of mafia-type organised criminal groups (OCGs) in property development, with a particular focus on peripheral areas. It has two main aims. Firstly, to shed light on the fact that mafia-type OCGs often become active players in this industry. Secondly, to identify those place-bound aspects that foster their infiltration of real estate development. To this end, the article reviews recent cases of infiltration in the sphere of urban development with regard to the non-traditional mafia area of northern Italy. By investigating two peripheral municipalities, Brescello and Desio, it offers an insight into two main factors that make peripheral areas an attractive property market for place-embedded criminal organisations such as mafia groups: firstly, the structural weaknesses of peripheral municipalities with regard to their political-administrative spheres which, in turn, amplify the shortcomings of the planning process; secondly, the fact that the peripheral property markets present some features that make them more likely to be affected by the economic input of OCGs and thus create an ideal scenario for a process of criminal accumulation by dispossession.

Keywords: organised crime; mafia; corruption; urban development; real estate; urban governance

1. The criminal side of property development

At the time, profits in the field of real estate were extremely high: nothing would guarantee better economic returns. The change in land use, from agricultural to construction, would lead to a 300-400% gain. For profits like these, you'd almost be willing to sell your own grandmother-in-law! It is no real surprise that this became the realm of unscrupulous people. Therefore, whereas historic property developers were struggling to source building plots, new, unknown and suspicious real estate firms were flourishing.

(Interview with R. Corti, Mayor of Desio from 2011 to 2021, 28 May 2015)

The words of this mayor, indicating how mafia enterprises have supplanted traditional local construction companies in his municipality, are less of an exception than they may appear. Judicial investigations, real life stories of property developers and direct experiences of several local administrators have told for some years of the deep infiltration by mafia groups of property development in Italy. Attracted by the extremely high and easy profits that can be made in this field, they have mobilised their relational and economic resources, together with their specialist use of intimidation and violence, to influence local institutions and markets and, consequently, to infiltrate urban development processes (Vannucci & Sberna, 2014). Such relationship between mafia speculation and real estate affairs is well documented with regard to some large cities or their hinterland—see for instance the literature looking at the historical case of Palermo (Scalia, 2021; P. T. Schneider & Schneider, 2003) and at the more recent case of Montreal (Beare, 2019). However, peripheral municipalities should not be excluded from the picture. To this end, the article reviews two recent cases of infiltration in two municipalities (Brescello and Desio) located in the non-traditional mafia area of northern Italy. The aim of the present article, in fact, is to offer an insight into the structural factors that make peripheral areas an attractive property market for place-embedded criminal organisations.

At this point, two clarifications would assist. Firstly, a terminological one: when discussing organised crime groups (OCGs), this paper refers specifically to mafia-type ones. Mafia groups are considered to be “a *specific type* of organised crime, being the latter the *species* of a more varied *genus* of organised crime” (Sergi & Storti, 2021, p. 4). More precisely, the case studies in question concern the

‘Ndrangheta, a mafia originating from the Calabria region.¹ Secondly, as concerns the concept of peripherality, it should be stressed that the purpose of this work is not to discuss it at length. Although this notion and the related core-periphery models are highly debated in the geographical literature (Glassman, 2009; Smith, 2008), we merely rely upon a general understanding of peripherality as implying exclusively the local nature of the property markets and the political-administrative spheres under investigation.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Initially, a theoretical review of the research on the relationship between property development and OCGs is performed. This sets the scene for examining the two cases, after providing a methodological note and contextualising northern Italy as an attractive expansion area for mafia organisations. Drawing on the empirical examination, the subsequent section focuses on the territorial dimension of criminal infiltration of property development, outlining the implications of peripherality. The final section draws conclusions as well as considering the geographical and epistemological relevance of our research with regard to urban governance and development beyond Italy.

2. Neglect of the dark side of property development

Despite notable exceptions, it can be argued that the issue of criminal infiltration of property development is under-studied by spatial disciplines such as urban sociology, geography and planning, which seldom consider the role of criminal practices and actors in urban phenomena and processes (Chiodelli, Hall, & Hudson, 2017; Hall, 2012). This is rather surprising, especially in view of the fact that research on property development has clearly shown that this field possesses some features that could be very attractive from the point of view of criminal actors.

Property development, in fact, is a hotly contested arena in which private agents always attempt to influence public decision-making (Fainstein, 2001). This has become even more evident over the last four decades as a consequence of urban neoliberalisation processes (Christophers, 2011; Harvey, 2012; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2009), which have greatly increased the economic, symbolic and political relevance of urban development with reference to the fate of a city and its control.

Within this framework, the literature on urban governance (Le Galès, 1998, 2011) and on urban regimes (see, among the many, Lauria, 1997; Logan & Molotch, 1987; Mossberger & Stoker, 2001; Stone, 1989) have demonstrated that the routes to completing a real estate project have become less and less straightforward and transparent. In fact, urban development processes often take on aspects of informality (for example, in terms of relationships between private players and public institutions) and, sometimes, of illegitimacy (i.e. of processes that, despite being legal on paper, achieve little social acceptance, such as lobbying the political sphere for a favourable planning decision). In contrast, very little attention has been paid to the role of proper illegal practices (e.g. corruption and intimidation) and illegal players (e.g. OCGs) in urban development and governance, in a sort of positivistic approach that sketches a picture of gentlemanly urban capitalism and politics, in which private and public actors, despite being self-interested, always obey the law (Chiodelli & Gentili, 2021).

Notwithstanding this lack of consideration, it can at least be assumed that criminal players are just as attracted to property development as traditional economic entities, for instance, by virtue of the high profit opportunities offered by this sector and the lower degree of complexity (e.g. in terms of technological know-how) and entrepreneurial risk compared to other business segments. Simultaneously, the fact that huge profits in property development can be obtained through opaque, informal and illegal practices (Chiodelli, 2019b, 2019a)—that are practices with which OCGs are very familiar (Sberna, 2014; Sberna & Vannucci, 2019)—is another reason not to downplay the risk of criminal infiltration.

Given this background, different shades of grey governance (Chiodelli & Gentili, 2021) can emerge in several geographical settings where the ordinary entanglement of public and private players that drives the governance of urban development is contaminated by the presence of criminal subjects. Put otherwise, property development represents an economic sector in which the complex entanglement of state and non-state entities, legal and illegal practices, diverse economic, political and symbolical rationalities composes the choreography of its *de facto* sovereignty (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2007; Davis, 2009).

While this overall picture could (and should) be considered rather obvious, it is less self-evident what specific features are taken on by the nexus between OCGs and property development. The field of criminology offers valuable insights in this direction. Criminological research has, in fact, investigated in depth the relationship between OCGs (and mafia-type ones in particular) and formal economic sectors, also paying attention (albeit in a more limited number of cases) to the specific sphere of property development.

As claimed by Dugato et al. (2015), criminological literature contains mainly descriptive studies on *where* and *how* OCGs can infiltrate property development (S. Schneider, 2004) and the extent of its threat to the legal economy (van Duyne & Soudijn, 2009).

Two recurring themes can be recognised. First, it is often claimed that mafias appear to see property especially as a means to controlling space in the areas where they have a strong territorial hold (e.g. traditional areas of southern Italy), thus increasing social consensus and prestige (Arlacchi, 2007; Dugato et al., 2015; Riccardi, Soriani, & Standridge, 2014). However, this does not mean that mafias cannot launder a portion of their money by trading in real estate and earn economic returns on those investments (Sciarrone, 2019b), sometimes even displaying a “rapacious business orientation” (Dagnes et al., 2020, p. 17), as shown for instance by Caneppele’s and Sarno’s work (2013) on ‘Ndrangheta’s international investments.

The second recurring theme is the pivotal role of the construction stage and, more specifically, the cement cycle and earth moving activities. Although this stage does not have the highest level of profitability, a great deal of literature shows that it is nonetheless characterised by a high rate of criminal infiltration (Ferrante, Fontana, & Reito, 2021; Savona & Riccardi, 2014). This is attributable to certain characteristics of the cement cycle and earth moving activities: low technological level, high labour intensity, high cash-intensiveness, numerous small (if not individual) companies and widespread use of subcontracts (Riccardi, 2014; Sacco, 2010; Sciarrone, Scaglione, Federico, & Vesco, 2010).

Criminological research dealing specifically with the infiltration of property development, although significant, offers a partial picture of why the field of urban

development is so attractive to OCGs. To get a more complete picture, one must broaden the gaze by analysing the literature that deals with mafia businesses (Catanzaro, 1988; Dalla Chiesa, 2012; Santino & La Fiura, 1990) and their infiltration of the legal economy (see, among others, Sciarrone, 2019a; Sciarrone & Storti, 2019; Varese, 2011). Such literature helps to construct a broader framework through which to read mafiosi's investments in real estate and to point out how mafias and territories mutually affect each other. More specifically, this framework encompasses: first, the role of OCGs as space-shaping actors (Sergi & Storti, 2021) and, second, the opportunity structure provided by local contexts—particularly when it comes to mafia-type OCGs (Dagnes et al., 2020).

As concerns the former aspect, Sergi and Storti (2021) draw on the geographical concept of the social construction of space to elaborate four ideal-typical processes of space shaping by OCGs, that is: controlling (i.e. the allocation of resources to the space), representing (i.e. power exhibition), diversifying (i.e. structuring and maintaining activities in/through space) and interconnecting space (i.e. linking territorial points with each other). It is crucial to highlight that mafia-type OCGs have “a quintessential orientation towards governing” by means of *controlling* and *manipulating* places (Sergi & Storti, 2021, p. 140). Unlike other OCGs that primarily target “hypertrophic business opportunities” (Sergi & Storti, 2021, p. 9), mafia groups act on a different basis. They put their money in traditional economic sectors that allow themselves to embed into local economies and societies (which is exactly the case for property development) and combine profit-driven activities (e.g. extortion) with power-driven ones (Transcrime, 2013).

The power dimension of mafias, which unfolds in their ability to control and exploit the allocation of resources within specific territorial contexts, can be better read by considering the second aspect, namely the intersection of the local opportunity structure with the way those opportunities are captured by the “relational and deal-making space” of the grey area (Sciarrone, 2019b, p. 7)—where by grey area we mean the “opaque space that unfolds between the legal and the illegal, in which relations of collusion and complicity with the mafia take shape” (Sciarrone, 2011b, p. 12). Dagnes et al. argue that “the specific constraints and opportunities available

[...], namely the characteristics of the administrative and institutional background” (2020, p. 4) are essential to understanding mafias’ infiltration of the legal economy by exploiting power resources that go beyond (although they may also include) their specialised use of violence.

In this regard, the organisational field of the grey area represents an arena that includes a variety of actors—businessmen, politicians, professionals, public officials and mafiosi themselves—and “gives rise to the stock of social capital which is such a valuable resource” for them (Sciarrone, 2019b, p. 2). It is within the grey area that ‘the crimes of the powerful’—e.g. political corruption and economic and white collar crime—are committed (Ruggiero, 2015). Here, mafia groups exchange their own resources—specialised use of violence and ability to manipulate social relations—with those that they are missing (e.g. advanced entrepreneurial ability).² In this regard, it must be stressed that mafiosi and businessmen are not the same. The former possesses modest entrepreneurial skills (Sciarrone, 2019b) and thus need the knowledge and skills offered by others in order to seize the local opportunities provided by the context in which they operate.

As a result, different relational configurations may emerge between mafiosi and entrepreneurs. Among them, relationships of *subordination* can subsist, which are established through coercion and through inciting the fear of violence.³ When the relationship between entrepreneurs and mafiosi, on the other hand, is more symmetrical, based on mutual obligations of loyalty and cooperation, it is possible to speak of *collusion*. For instance, this is the case of infiltration by exploiting the shortcomings of public procurement processes. There is a well-established literature on this theme that pinpoints the role played by OCGs within the grey area in terms of collusion networks that facilitate corrupt transactions (Fazekas, Sberna, & Vannucci, 2022). *Mafioso control*, finally, exists when criminal cells take the role of fully-fledged real estate developers. This condition materialises either in mafia enterprises (a company that operates in the legal domain but resorts to violence to overcome market competition) or shield enterprises (a company serving as a vehicle for money laundering and business transactions).

The abovementioned framework allows us to formulate two considerations. First, that mafias' investments in the legal economy in general—and in property development more specifically—are less about mafiosi's agency alone and much more about the local opportunities captured by the grey area in which mafiosi are inserted (and that allows mafiosi to diversify their portfolio of investments). Second, that it becomes crucial to understand not just *where* and *how* mafia invests, but also (and especially) *what* local, place-bound, factors facilitate mafiosi's choice to invest in the specific sector of property development.

3. Evidence from peripheral non-traditional areas in Italy

3.1 A methodological note

The paper is constructed through the in-depth qualitative analysis of two case studies. It is worth specifying that their presence is not linked to any comparative operation. In fact, they are treated in their singularity: each case provides different but complementary elements for understanding criminal infiltration of urban development in peripheral areas. That is, they are a couple of “critical cases” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 78) which, despite their geographical and temporal diversity, provide a robust, fine-grained, in-depth narrative of the phenomenon in question. Both cases, although they have been analysed in subsequent periods, refer to criminal episodes that took place in the 2000s and 2010s in non-traditional areas of mafia infiltration in northern Italy (Sciarrone & Storti, 2014; Varese, 2011).

These cases have been reconstructed mainly through documentary sources, which have been further enriched through ad hoc interviews. We analysed two main types of documents. Firstly, judicial documents: court rulings, arrest warrants and reports, providing a detailed picture of the perpetrators, the tactics and the reasons behind the illegal practices that occurred in Desio and Bressello. Such judicial documents are a true gold mine for research: their thousands of pages of wiretaps, interrogations and court analyses allow to outline an extremely detailed picture of the events (for a discussion on limitations and cautions in the use of these materials, see: Alison, Snook, & Stein, 2001; Hobbs & Antonopoulos, 2014; Paoli, 2003). It would otherwise have been extremely difficult (if not impossible) to reconstruct these

events independently, for instance through ethnographic work, because of the criminal nature of the practices in question (see Ferrell & Hamm, 2016). Secondly, we reviewed public urban development documents (e.g. local planning documents, city council minutes, municipal policy reports), together with news items reported in local and national newspapers (*Il Giornno*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *La Gazzetta di Reggio*, *Il Giornale di Desio*, *Il Giornale di Seregno*).

Detailed information obtained from these documental sources have been supplemented by interviews, in order to deepen aspects of the cases in question that were not included in the court documents or in the other analysed sources (e.g. the features of the local property market, the functioning of urban planning at the local level, the impressions of some key players in property development on urban transformation processes).⁴ With reference to Desio, from May 2015 to September 2016, we carried out five semi-structured interviews (two politicians, one professional who worked on the master plan and two civil servants who were employed in the municipality's Planning Department) and four unstructured interviews (two local entrepreneurs in the field of urban development, one local architect and one local landowner). With reference to Brescello, between October 2021 and January 2022, we conducted four semi-structured interviews (Head of the municipality's Planning Department, two members of local anti-mafia groups and the former representative of a local trade union), one group interview with members of the municipality's Mixed Commission for Legality (including the urban planning councillor and representatives of civil society associations) and three unstructured interviews with researchers who had previously investigated mafia infiltration in that area. The semi-structured interviews lasted, on average, between 45 and 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. The same applies to all but one of the unstructured interviews for the case of Brescello. For Desio, on the other hand, all unstructured interviews were not recorded at the request of the interviewees.

3.2. Mafia in non-traditional areas of Italy

Until rather recent years, public and political opinion considered the presence of mafia in Italy to be confined to those regions of southern Italy in which the main mafia groups had originated (i.e. Apulia, Calabria, Campania and Sicily). However,

numerous judicial inquiries and academic research have revealed that mafia groups have, for decades now, expanded their presence outside their traditional settlement areas. They are now known to operate in different portions of the country (and even outside of Italy), including northern Italy (Allum, Clough Marinaro, & Sciarrone, 2019; CROSS, 2017; Sciarrone, 2019). For a long time, this latter area was assumed to have good levels of trust in the institutions, high civic culture and strong cooperation levels (Putnam, 1993), which were thought to have raised the moral costs of illegal exchanges and to have been effective enough to prevent mafia infiltration.

Recent events have, however, contradicted these assumptions. Mafia interests in northern Italy have expanded from ‘traditional’ illegal businesses and the related laundering of the proceeds into the legal economy (Catino, 2018; Ciconte, 2010; Varese, 2011) to taking active part in legal businesses. There are multiple reasons for this expansion, both exogenous and endogenous in nature (Sciarrone & Storti, 2014; Varese, 2011). These include the so-called watered-down compromise (Barca, 2010), namely the increasing lack of competitiveness of economic players due to the historically high, but inefficient, level of regulation by public institutions. This situation negatively affected numerous firms, even before the 2007-2009 economic crisis, and mafia organisations were able to take advantage of this by absorbing part of those compromised firms and reaching out to the ones willing to receive support and protection (Alessandri, 2017). This scenario is a reminder that opportunities for illegal practices may arise not only out of sheer deregulation, but also from the opposite phenomenon. Property development is no exception.

Mafia infiltration of property development goes beyond the main cities of northern Italy, such as Milan, also covering geographically peripheral zones, namely minor municipalities and areas with low population density (Dalla Chiesa, 2017; Sciarrone, 2019). In this regard, the cases of Brescello and Desio display two varieties of the concept of peripherality. Brescello is a typical village located in a rural environment. Desio, despite lying at the edge of Milan—Italy’s economic capital city and the country’s most buoyant land and housing market—is characterised by a non-dynamic (if not stagnant following the 2007-2009 economic crisis) property

market of exclusively local nature. This aspect places Desio in the same league as Brescello, along with many other Italian peripheral municipalities.

The following subsections explore these two cases, which offer an opportunity to reflect on the different methods of mafia infiltration of the property market and the corresponding peripheral aspects of property development that facilitate this infiltration.

3.3 The case of Brescello: criminal infiltration in civilissima Emilia

Located in the northeast of Italy, the municipality of Brescello has around 6,000 inhabitants and lies on the northern edge of Emilia-Romagna, a region that used to be connoted by economic development based on the *cooperative* [cooperatives] model (Zamagni and Zamagni, 2010) and supported by high levels of social capital that were key to its high institutional performance (Putnam, 1993).

Its depiction as an “anonymous village” (Ingrascì, 2019, p. 141) is reflected by the local nature of both its property market and its political history. In relation to the property market of Brescello, this was negatively affected by its remoteness from the main road infrastructures of the region. After the 2008 economic decline and the ensuing increase in costs for supplies, the industry became stagnant, particularly with regard to the residential sector (Interview with member of Brescello’s Mixed Commission for Legality, 19 January 2022). In relation to the political history of Brescello, this used to resemble a family-run business and between 1974 and 2016—the year in which the municipal administration was placed into receivership⁵—a member of the same family was always present in the town hall (usually as mayor):

“The Coffrini is a family that has made it, with rural origins. Before becoming mayor, Ermes Coffrini became a lawyer and so did his son. Coffrini was a cultured and rich man, and also a communist. He represented the good man, the one who helped the poor, a modern Robin Hood. It was said that it was useless to have a Festa dell’Unità [a festival organised by the Italian Communist Party] in Brescello, because the votes were already taken hands down.” (Interview with member #1 of Brescello’s anti-mafia group, 26 November 2021)

Brescello, along with other municipalities in the same area, came under the spotlight of the investigators in the 2010s. It was the *Aemilia* operation (Corte d'Appello di Bologna, 2017; Tribunale di Bologna, 2015) that provided a comprehensive picture of the stronghold gained by the 'Ndrangheta in Emilia-Romagna (Cabras, 2017; Sergi & Lavorgna, 2016).

The evidence offered by the judicial material suggests that the infiltration process by the OCG took a leap forward from the 2000s and that the infiltration of property development was one of its key targets. Mafia cells expanded their interests in this regard beyond those of *caporalato* [illegal employment of construction workers] and extortion of small construction companies. In fact, they aimed to build ties with local entrepreneurs and politicians and also to establish mafioso control, so that they could have an influence, either directly or indirectly, on property development. The statement made by an informer with regard to an entrepreneur linked with the 'Ndrangheta who would “build anything and everything” in Reggio Emilia (Tribunale di Bologna, 2015, p. 268) is testimony to the embeddedness reached by 'Ndrangheta in the area.

The case of Brescello highlights this transition and the criminal interests in property development brought about by the new stage of infiltration. In particular, the rise of the Grande Aracri *locale* is emblematic of how “the problems posed by transformations of the territory, generated by economic changes, offered mafia organisations favourable opportunities to infiltrate” (Ingrascì, 2019, p. 166). As emphasised in an interview with the Head of the Planning Office of Brescello:

Calabrian construction companies took hold also because there was a phase in which local companies made use of workers, not always lawfully, giving up legitimate employees. Those companies gradually took root, slowly but surely conquering the market. (26 November 2021)

The involvement of Grande Aracri reveals the illegal side of this rags-to-riches story: while, on its arrival, the members of this locale initially struggled in their precarious conditions like other Calabrian migrants, within a short period of time they achieved a leap in economic status and their construction companies grew exponentially. According to a local resident:

They made money with construction works. Coincidentally almost all the works in which they made money were public, or they built for themselves and then sold apartments as they did in many buildings in Brescello.” (Interview with a Brescello resident, 26 November 2021)

Against this background, the case of a property transaction conducted by a shield enterprise of Grande Aracri on a brownfield site – the so-called ‘ex Arkos’ area – constitutes evidence that the OCG was able to exploit opportunities to gain standing as a fully-fledged real estate developer in a peripheral context – Brescello – in which real estate transactions are rare and development in the residential and productive sectors is exclusively driven by small local companies (Head of Planning Office, personal communication, 26 November 2021). Indeed, it was the opportunity of undertaking pre-emptive speculation on this former industrial area that attracted the investment interests of the locale. After purchasing the plot in the guise of a legitimate company, in 2010 the shield enterprise persuaded the municipality to accept a recovery plan to convert the plot into a supermarket (Municipality of Brescello, 2011b, 2011a). The company took advantage of the latter aspect – i.e. the convenience of building a supermarket near to a small residential area – to obtain the approval of the recovery plan, thereafter pre-arranging the sale of the finished property with a well-known supermarket chain. Although the OCG would be expected to carry out the construction works itself, it actually decided to subcontract them to another (legal) enterprise. Indeed, it was the property speculation that guaranteed the greatest rewards by yielding a 45% profit from the initial investment (Presidente della Repubblica, 2016).

Because of the “ex Arkos” case—along with other circumstances of misconduct discovered in Brescello’s urban planning system—Reggio Emilia’s prefecture placed the municipality into receivership. Although none of the members of the then Administration were convicted, the report by the prefecture emphasises the crucial role played by them. In particular, it highlights “the existence of concrete, univocal and significant elements on direct and indirect links of local administrators with mafia crime” (Presidente della Repubblica, 2016, p. 3).

3.4 The case of Desio: criminal infiltration at the edge of a metropolis

Located in central northern Italy, Desio is a town in the Lombardy region, situated in the metropolitan area of Milan. Despite its location and the fact that it has approximately 40,000 inhabitants, Desio combines, like Bressello, the typical features of many Italian peripheral municipalities: it is predominantly a residential area and its property market is not particularly dynamic, even becoming stagnant following the 2008 crisis, and is exclusively of local nature. The political and bureaucratic administrators who govern Desio are also exclusively local.

Over the past decade, Desio has been in the public eye as a result of judicial enquiries targeting the presence of mafia-type OCGs, along with episodes of illegality in urban development (Chiodelli, 2019b, 2019a). The town was one of the first cases of ‘Ndrangheta settlement in the Lombardy region (Tribunale di Milano, 2010). The Desio *locale* had been active as early as in the 1970s, but it was in the late 1980s that it increased its expansion from the illegal to the legal economy (Storti, Dagnes, Pellegrino, & Sciarrone, 2019) by operating in various economic sectors including, crucially, construction (Interview with a former member of the City Council, 3 March 2016). The construction cycle represents one of the key economic strategies of the ‘Ndrangheta in the area. This did not materialise only in subordinating existing companies (e.g. by demanding that they assign earth-moving work to companies linked to mafia groups), but, often, also in establishing mafioso control over them. This approach applied both to small, family-owned construction companies as well as to larger enterprises. For instance, according to the judiciary (Tribunale di Milano, 2012) the OCG had taken control of one of the main construction companies in Lombardy—*Perego Costruzioni*—which owned dozens of construction sites throughout the region. As in the case of other firms, its control was acquired by resorting to intimidation and racketeering (Tribunale di Milano, 2010) as a means of forcing the owners gradually to hand over its reins. As a result, the ownership of the firm was transferred, initially *de facto* and later *de jure*, to members close to the Desio *locale*. The control of established legal companies has been strategic for the ‘Ndrangheta cells. In this way, they created shield enterprises that could participate in large public bids which, once won, were subcontracted to

companies directly controlled by the criminal group. For example, thanks to the control of *Perego Costruzioni*, the ‘Ndrangheta managed to infiltrate the construction works of the site for the international Expo2015 exhibition in Milan (Tribunale di Milano, 2012).

However, the ‘Ndrangheta cell in Desio did not limit its activities to the construction sector, but extended them to the entire property development sphere. In performing the role of a fully-fledged property developer, Desio *locale* did not abandon its illegal practices, but actually exploited them in order to increase its profit margins (Interview with a local entrepreneur, 22 June 2016). In particular, it mobilised its murky connections with leading political and bureaucratic representatives at local level (Interview with a member of the City council, 28 May 2015). These connections were so widespread, deep and robust that “it can be safely said that the members of the mafia cell could count on leading figures to solve problems and obtain advantages within the public administration” (Tribunale di Milano, 2010, p. 688).

In this context, it does not seem coincidental that corruption and illegal practices proliferated rapidly in the field of urban development in Desio. This happened in particular (but not only) within the framework of the 2009 master plan, many decisions of which were influenced by bribery (Chiodelli, 2019b), thus awarding considerable economic advantages to a “cluster of suspicious property companies, mafia members and the usual suspects” (Interview with an urban planner, 3 March 2016).⁶

At the same time, some episodes of illegal building were linked to the actions of property developers having personal connections to members of the *locale* (Interview with a member of the planning office, 8 April 2016). These entrepreneurs increased their profits by building and selling flats that did not have the necessary building permits (for a detailed analysis, see Chiodelli, 2019a). Such illegal building practices, according to the judiciary, were facilitated by decisions, actions or inactions by officials of the Planning Office. “It is hard to believe that all these omissions by the planning office [with regard to identifying and sanctioning illegal buildings] were the result of mere incompetence and [...] of a basic lack of

professionalism” (Tribunale di Monza, 2014, p. 20); it is more likely that they were implemented intentionally to benefit the members of the grey area.

Against the backdrop of this multiple action of organised crime—which controlled the cement and earth-moving cycle, influenced urban planning decisions to its own advantage and illegally built housing in a climate of impunity—it is not surprising that urban development in Desio became (as a whole and not just in some of its segments) a field dominated by companies in a relationship of subordination, collusion and control with the ‘Ndrangheta, with the consequent disappearance of traditional real estate enterprises (Interview with R. Corti, Mayor of Desio from 2011 to 2021, 28 May 2015).

4. The incentives of peripherality to criminal infiltration of property development

The cases of Brescello and Desio clearly demonstrate that mafia-type OCGs can and have entered into the field of property development. This happened because their power resources have been perfectly harmonised with some features that are typical of many peripheral areas as regards both the political and bureaucratic apparatuses (particularly those related to urban planning) and the local property market.

4.1 Peripherality and the planning process

The first factor to be considered when analysing the nexus between peripherality and criminal infiltration concerns the structural shortcomings of the urban planning system, which are amplified in the case of small administrative-bureaucratic structures.

Urban planning, which is the public process that enables any property development project and regulates it (thus defining its profit margins), is *per se* a field deeply permeated by illegal practices (Transparency International, 2011). As some research has demonstrated (Chiodelli & Moroni, 2015; Gardiner & Lyman, 1978), specific features of the urban planning process make it particularly open to illicit and illegal pressure. These features include: the strong economic significance of land use and planning decisions; the high degree of discretion in these decisions; the abundant

availability of confidential information; the very low degree of accountability (see Chiodelli, 2019b for a detailed analysis).

The loopholes in the planning process can be exploited by ordinary (i.e. legal) property developers, so as to exert pressure on the local political sphere to change certain planning decisions in their favour. The sophisticated analysis of the deep influence that place-bound entrepreneurs exercise on public decisions at local level (see, for instance, the literature on urban regimes mentioned in the second section of this paper) materialises in trivial form in a small village such as Brescello, where real estate transactions are rare and development in the residential and productive sectors is mostly driven by small local companies:

It is undeniable that when a major company showed up, it dictated the town planning rules. If a company proposed an expansion project that would employ hundreds of people, many administrators often succumbed to this request. (Interview with Brescello's Head of Planning Office, 26 November 2021)

While, in many cases, this type of pressure is informal but, despite this, does not overstep the boundaries of the law, in some instances it can take illegal forms, such as corruption, intimidation or violence. It is within this framework that OCGs, which are particularly skilful at using these illegal practices, can deeply influence urban planning choices—either to benefit themselves as real estate entrepreneurs or to benefit legal companies requiring this type of ‘intermediation service’. In the latter case, mafia organisations can enable corrupt exchanges by both preventing any contrast that may compromise the stability of collusive exchanges or connecting the different players involved, therefore facilitating the collusive network (Della Porta & Vannucci, 2012; Sciarrone, 2006; Vannucci & Sberna, 2014).

If the urban planning system is everywhere permeable to unlawful practices, this applies even more so in peripheral municipalities, where OCGs are able to infiltrate the bureaucratic and political spheres thoroughly and easily, as demonstrated by the case of Brescello. The recurring presence of the same individuals in the town council and the urban planning commission (the position of mayor and urban planning councillor both constantly being held by members of the same family), along with the involvement of entrepreneurs that were later found to have colluded

with the ‘Ndrangheta (Tribunale di Bologna, 2015), meant that personal relationships—and not formal and impersonal procedures—were a crucial mechanism for establishing the necessary ‘paperwork’ to obtain, for instance, a building permit (Interview with member #2 of Brescello’s anti-mafia group, 26 November 2021).

A similar situation occurred in Desio, in spite of its larger dimensions. In Desio, too, some key figures in the field of property development were found to have a high degree of stability in their roles, the prime example being the Director-in-Chief of the Planning Department. This individual, who was in charge for more than twenty years and, according to some, was “the real alderman for urban planning” (Interview with an urban planner, 3 March 2016), had close personal contacts with people embedded in the environment of the *locale* (Tribunale di Milano, 2010). In Desio also key local politicians had contact with members of the *locale* (Tribunale di Milano, 2010) and, in the 1980s, the position of Town Planning and Building Alderman of the Municipality of Desio was even held by the brother of the head of the Desio ‘Ndrangheta (Tribunale di Milano, 2010a).

Such deep infiltration by OCGs in the political and bureaucratic spheres of minor municipalities is also assisted by the fact that OCGs can influence political elections—and therefore the appointment of key local government figures—with relative ease. In minor Italian municipalities, in fact, the political framework is often not very dynamic (i.e. there are few people involved in local political life) and localistic (i.e. politics mainly takes place through civic lists with no connection to traditional parties at regional and national level). Gaining control of a relatively small number of votes can be sufficient to exert a strong influence on local elections; this is an easy task for OCGs such as the ‘Ndrangheta, which always exercises strong territorial control (Sergi, 2017).

Therefore, it must be recognised that in peripheral municipalities there is the risk that urban planning and property development become an insider job that is framed mainly by shady relationships with public officials, local politicians and criminals. This risk is amplified by two further institutional features of peripheral areas. Firstly, the fact that land use plans are usually drawn up by the bureaucratic staff of the

municipality, that is without the intervention of external professionals as occurs in the larger cities. This makes it even easier for OCGs to manipulate planning decisions to their advantage: they only need to gain control over a few bureaucratic or political figures (e.g. the Head of the Planning Office).

Secondly, some structural administrative weaknesses of peripheral municipalities have been exacerbated in recent decades by the adjustments made to administrative mechanisms in light of the New Public Management (NPM) rationale and the related reduction of financial resources from the central government. This transition has occurred in the majority of Western countries since the 1990s (Heinrich 2011) and Italy is no exception. With regard to peripheral municipalities, NPM reforms—along with years of budget restrictions and austerity—have exacerbated their chronic understaffed situation by limiting staff turnover and the recruitment of skilled staff. The specific role played by planning fees with reference to local public budgets must be considered too. Given that Italian municipalities have little room for manoeuvre with respect to local taxation, planning fees have been (until a few years ago) one of the main sources of revenue that a local administration could directly influence (Pileri, 2009). In this context, peripheral municipalities were most incentivised to facilitate almost any development project in their area, particularly if the local property market was stagnant, as this was the only way of obtaining extra funding for municipal activities.

4.2 Peripherality and the property market: criminal accumulation by dispossession

The second factor that is typical of peripheral municipalities and favours the criminal infiltration of property development concerns the characteristics of the local property market. As discussed, the literature on criminal infiltration of property development emphasises the relevance of locally based, low-tech and labour-intensive production factors, such as manpower and construction material. The cases of Brescello and Desio, however, follow a different pattern.

In the case of “ex Arkos” in Brescello, the cement cycle was not involved in the mechanisms of mafia infiltration as the construction works were actually contracted to a legal local company. The focus of the mafia cell was on a land rent-based transaction, which was clearly driven by speculative purposes. To achieve this, the

shield enterprise demonstrated good coordination skills and upon the submission of the development plan the colluded enterprise had already sealed a deal with a *legal* construction company, along with the prearranged sale of the finished property with a *legal* supermarket chain.

This case suggests that the condition of peripherality may offer OCGs the opportunity to ‘take another leap of scale’, from dealing with a single segment of property development (i.e. the cement cycle) to becoming fully-fledged property developers. This seems to be the result of three main factors: firstly, property development in peripheral areas is not particularly complex with regard to property transactions; secondly, the level of competition does not match that of metropolitan areas, nor does the scope of development projects; thirdly, peripheral municipalities are more prone to economic stagnation (even in the field of property development) and are, therefore, more likely to succumb to mafia infiltration and its economic input (Calderoni & Caneppele, 2009; Savona & Riccardi, 2015). These factors help mafia organisations to manage place-based resources and exclude their competitors (using power resources like intimidation and violence) and to bypass the constraints of their limited human capital and entrepreneurial resources.

The case of Desio corroborates such argument: even though the ‘Ndrangheta cell was also active in controlling the cement cycle and earth moving activities, evidence suggests that it acted, more generally, as a fully-fledged property developer, acquiring plots to be developed and constructing small multi-storey buildings to be sold on the legal market. Illegal practices were, in these cases, deployed to increase the profit margins of its development activities, for instance by avoiding sanctions or obtaining favourable land use designations.

To scale up the aforementioned reasoning, it is possible to draw an analogy with Harvey’s thesis of “accumulation by dispossession” (2003) and expand previous works (as Scalia, 2021) that use the theoretical lens of the production of space to analyse issues of mafia infiltration of property development.

David Harvey introduced the concept of “accumulation by dispossession” to explain the mechanisms through which capitalism perpetuates its power and generates wealth. The notion emphasises the active and forceful process by which certain

groups accumulate capital at the expense of others through various forms of dispossession. Harvey's focus is on actors that despite acting sometimes illegitimately—i.e. through actions that meet little social acceptance, such as lobbying the political sphere for a favourable planning decision—belong anyway to the legal realm.

We argue, instead, that “accumulation by dispossession” can occur through the action of illegal actors too and label this process as “*criminal* accumulation by dispossession”. More to this point, by examining “criminal accumulation by dispossession”, we can analyse the power dynamics at play in urban spaces such as the peripheral areas under study.

In both the cases of Brescello and Desio the confiscation of resources, as well as the exploitation of labour and the creation of quasi-monopolies as for the local property development market, is enacted by territorially-embedded mafia cells that consolidate their wealth and power while dispossessing others—in our cases, local construction companies—of their means of subsistence and autonomy.

Indeed, mafia groups appear to implement an *accumulation* process by trading upon asset values. This transition progresses at the same pace as the takeover (i.e. *dispossession*), legal or not, of previously existing property firms and their assets. In fact, the income of local firms has been reduced not only by the economic crisis and by the inefficient public regulation system, but also by the operations of shield enterprises, which have stolen market shares from legal companies by means of violence and unfair competition (e.g. by obtaining favourable planning and building decisions thanks to their opaque connections with the public sphere). As a result, small legal local firms have either gone bankrupt or been absorbed by an emerging cluster of mafia and shield enterprises that operate on the basis of a process of *criminal accumulation by dispossession*. In this regard, the mafia-type dynamics of exchange value unsettle not only the built environment—as shown by Jane and Peter Schneider's anthropological review of the speculative building and destruction of Palermo and Youngstown (2005)—but also previously existing clusters of locally-based economic actors.

5. Concluding remarks: the dark governance of property development beyond Italy

The previous sections highlighted the relationship between mafia-type OCGs and property development through the analysis of two case studies in northern Italy. The paper suggests two crucial aspects that—in light of the huge profits that can be earned in the real estate sector—may push OCGs to operate in, and exert mafioso control over, peripheral property markets. The first aspect concerns the structural weaknesses of peripheral municipalities with regard to their political-administrative spheres which, in turn, amplify the shortcomings of the planning process. This allows criminals to obtain favourable public decisions that are crucial to their real estate activities. The second aspect relates to the fact that peripheral property markets are more likely to be affected by the economic input of mafia-type OCGs and thus create an ideal scenario for a process of criminal accumulation by dispossession.

Against this backdrop, it is interesting to consider the relevance of these findings beyond the narrow confines of property development in peripheral areas of northern Italy. Although this question would require a thorough and protracted investigation to get to a robust answer, it is conceivable to highlight a few aspects that suggest the possibility of scaling up our reasoning in both geographical and epistemological terms.

From a geographical perspective, we provide two reasons why northern Italy may represent a hyper-example, rather than an exception, with regard to similar cases of criminal infiltration in other Western countries. The first one refers to the features of the criminal environment. The peculiarity of the Italian criminal panorama cannot be underestimated, as well as the way it is affected by the opportunity structure given by the systemic nature of collusive and corrupt networks in Italy. Nonetheless, Italian OCGs are increasingly becoming transnational in nature (particularly the ‘Ndrangheta; see Sergi, 2017, 2019). When they expand abroad, they usually act similarly to the case of northern Italy (e.g. they do not exercise the profound territorial control that they typically demonstrate in some of their ‘home territories’ in southern Italy; see Dagnes, Donatiello, & Storti, 2019; Sciarrone & Storti, 2014).

In a nutshell, the mafia problem is no longer peculiar to Italy. The second reason refers to the features of property development processes. In particular, the shortcomings of the political-administrative structures of peripheral municipalities, which are at the root of OGC infiltration, are also—and even crucially—the product of opportunities that are inherent in land-use and building systems in the majority of Western countries (Chiodelli & Moroni, 2015; Flyvbjerg, 2012). Moreover, one must also consider, on this matter, two further elements that emerged from our analysis, which are not at all just an Italian peculiarity: firstly, the tendency of peripheral property markets to be stagnant, with limited levels of competition and complexity, and, secondly, the fact that the latter are characterised by the presence of traditional real estate players that struggle to survive economic crises and structural changes related to neoliberalisation.

Our analysis may be scaled up not only in terms of geographical relevance, but also in terms of epistemological value. In fact, it offers a vantage point on forms of hybrid governance (Davis, 2017) and how to interpret those “performative claims” (Stepputat, 2015, p. 129) by OCGs that are not included in a strict *de jure* understanding of sovereignty. In relation to Italy, the presence of OCGs in some regions of the south, in which mafia exercise strict territorial control (Paoli, 2003), has usually been seen as constituting forms of partial, *de facto*, sovereignty (Transcrime, 2009). However, these forms of sovereignty are not the only ones possible. In the areas where the presence of OCGs is less evident and less strong (e.g. in northern Italy as well as in other non-Italian contexts in which mafia-type OCGs have taken root), mafia presence can translate into hybrid arrangements of governance that do not manifest in a territorial form (i.e. they are not based on the strict control of a specific area). On the contrary, these arrangements are centred on influencing certain economic sectors and institutional spheres *along with* other legal players (Sciarrone, 2011a, 2019b), thus depicting an overall picture of hybrid local governance which includes several grey or dark shades.

Notes

1. The organisation of the ‘Ndrangheta revolves around *‘ndrine* and *locali*. *‘Ndrine* (families) are the basic cell units whereas a *locale* (cell) comprises, in most cases, no more than two *‘ndrine*. Each *locale* tends to operate exclusively in its own constituency, so that there is no competition in the same area (Sergi & Lavorgna, 2016).
2. The resource exchange can be described through the following ideal-type: businessmen would provide financial resources, politicians would provide authority-related ones, professionals and public officials would provide technical, normative and regulatory resources. It is also worth stressing how mafiosi do not necessarily occupy a dominant position within this resource exchange (Sciarrone, 2019b).
3. These relations seem to be particularly recurrent in segments of the cement cycle and earth moving activities, that are dominated by small and individual companies which can be more strictly controlled through extortive practices rather than the more structured ones (Ferrante, Fontana, & Reito, 2021; Transcrime, 2009).
4. The research participants gave their explicit consent to use their interview statements for research purposes. In case they asked to remain anonymous, their name does not appear in the present article.
5. According to Italian legislation, the receivership procedure is an extraordinary prevention measure that is applied when there is a real danger that the activity of a municipality or other local administration is bent to the interests of the mafia clans. In order to ascertain the influence of criminal organisations on the local authority, the Minister of the Interior appoints a special prefectural investigation commission. The prefect then transmits the conclusions of this work to the Minister of the Interior, who decides whether to submit the proposal for dissolution to the Council of Ministers, which decides on the merits. The subsequent dissolution decree is signed by the President of the Republic.
6. During the discussion on the master plan by the City Council (Comune di Desio, 2009a, 2009b), there were numerous accusations that several decisions were made “on the basis of one’s surname”.

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The urban commons meet new municipalism. Power, rationality and the eventualities of progressive urbanism

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Abstract

The article questions in which terms the lack of regime incumbency—i.e. a consolidated governing capacity required to deliver one’s agenda and succeed politically—can curb the ambitions of progressive coalition governments. It shows, in this regard, the key role played by “power over” practices that are concealed under the guise of “power with” institutional solutions and the rationales through which these power mechanisms materialise. By examining the case of Padova (Italy) and focusing on institutional solutions that blend progressive elements such the commons agenda and new-municipalist politics, the article provides a twofold argument. First, it argues that coalition politics tends to focus on procedural aspects while hindering agenda renewal. Second, it claims that the ambiguities inherent in vocabularies such as the commons’ and that of new municipalism substantially compromise their delivery. The article provides evidence of these elements by examining three conflictual instances of vacant public spaces.

Keywords: participatory governance; urban politics; urban commons; new municipalism; urban regime

1. Progressive urbanism and its eventualities

Padova has taken a brave, progressive stand in showing its openness to the shared use of public spaces. But there is an unexpected gap between theory—in this case, the urban commons regulation—and practice. Nothing has been done so far, apart from a little free maintenance work requested by the citizens and authorised by the municipal administration [...]. As many of the attendees at the meeting said, “The impression is that they don't know what to do”. Others are beginning to suspect that the administration is only trying to use that regulation to “get some free labour”. (Il Mattino di Padova, 2022b)

The idea of actively involving local communities in conceiving and putting in place policies for reusing neglected urban spaces is one of left-leaning municipal administrations' favourite mantras. In this connection, the words taken from this local newspaper in Padova—a mid-sized city in Northeastern Italy that has recently experimented with new-municipalist practices and the urban commons agenda—describe a typical deadlock in the implementation of progressive policies (Bianchi, 2022; Ostanel & Attili, 2018; Ostanel & Cancellieri, 2014).

In recent years, the momentum for governance tools reflecting a progressive perspective has grown: cities have rejected pro-market, public-private governance schemes and embraced institutional solutions that are open to an active contribution by citizen initiatives (Ostanel, 2017; Pradel-Miquel, 2021).

The wave of new municipalism that originated in Southern Europe during the 2010s (Thompson, 2021) is part of this trend towards progressive urbanism (Joy & Vogel, 2021; Tonkiss, 2020)—i.e. “political projects aimed at increasing social justice, citizenship and democracy in relation to municipal or local government and the lived spaces, places, and processes of urban life” (Beveridge & Naumann, 2021, p. 4).

Still, implementing progressive policies is challenging. “Progressive” is a disputed political terrain, as it always entails “some kind of accommodation with the existing political context, a certain gradualism—unlike an overtly radical project” (Beveridge & Naumann, 2021, p. 2). The literature on urban politics, and most notably on urban regime theory (Stone, 1993; Stone & Sanders, 1987) and contemporary engagements with it (Camou, 2014; Davies, 2021; Jones-Correa & Wong, 2015; Stone, 2015), has devoted much attention to the eventualities of progressive politics given by the nature of institutional politics and the state.

The article explores the room left to reshape urban policies and adopts the notion of (lack of) “regime incumbency”—i.e. “the degree to which a coalition consolidates the governing capacity across state, economy and civil society required to deliver its agenda and succeed politically” (Bua & Davies, 2022, p. 2)—to pinpoint the limits of progressive municipal governments. Indeed, the advent of progressive politics does not mean that they will automatically replace the previous system of political apparatuses and technical relations.

We show, in this regard, the key role played by “power over” practices—i.e. authoritative decisions on behalf of the municipal government—that are concealed under the guise of “power with”, collaborative, institutional solutions.

To give evidence of this, we examine the case of the progressive coalition government that ruled the city of Padova from 2017 to 2022 and attempted both to change the urban agenda and to democratise decision-making processes by making explicit reference to the urban commons and new-municipalist vocabularies.

The argument is twofold: first, the article argues that coalition politics tends to overemphasise “the procedures of participation” (Béal et al., 2023, p. 3) while hindering agenda renewal; second, it claims that the ambiguities inherent in the urban commons and new-municipalist vocabularies substantially compromise their delivery.

In terms of methods, we adopt Flyvbjerg’s phronetic approach to case studying (2001, 2004) and provide a description of relations between power and rationality in three conflictual instances of vacant public spaces. As a result, we suggest two rationales through which regime incumbency materialises: a) a procedural interpretation of participatory decision-making that justifies the coexistence of the urban commons and public-private solutions and, b) the discretionary use of participatory decision-making and urban commons regulation as a means of avoiding conflict.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. Section two reviews the theoretical debate on the relationship between urban commons theory and new-municipalist practices. Section three introduces the research methodology and sets the scene for section four, which examines the case study. Drawing on the empirical examination,

the subsequent section provides a reflexive discussion of urban commons values and fleshes out the two interpretations presented in the paper. The concluding section offers considerations on power-related factors that hinder the potential of progressive urbanism.

2. The urban commons and new municipalism: a suitable pairing for progressive politics?

Urban commons theory and new-municipalist practices have an elective affinity with progressive politics and its claim to citizen empowerment at the local level (Bianchi, 2022a; Bianchi et al., 2022). However, their arenas are inhabited by heterogeneous groups—e.g. activists, civil associations and policy makers hailing from different places, having divergent backgrounds, and harbouring contrasting political interests (Eidelman & Safransky, 2021; Thompson, 2021)—so that the political use of their vocabularies does not always head in the same direction. For this reason, we review the paths followed by urban commons theory and new-municipalist practices and their respective claims to progressive politics.

2.1 The urban commons and the claim to city space and urban resources

The commons theory is at the centre of debates about how societies manage natural and human resources. A transposition of a long-standing political tradition (De Moor, 2015), it has gained a renewed interest in the urban domain in response to “financial and political crises across the globe, resulting austerity measures, and the accompanying loss of faith in market-based systems and the State to ensure the equitable distribution of resources” (Eidelman & Safransky, 2021, p. 797). However, this transposition is far from straightforward.

Key new-institutionalist ideas about natural resources as outlined by Ostrom (1990)—a central voice in the commons discussion—take problematic assumptions for granted when applied to the city. Borch and Kornberger, for instance, argue that “a city is first and foremost a configuration of relationality and density where that which is shared, i.e. the commons, is not something that diminishes in its usage”

(2016, p. 1). This is in sharp contrast to Ostrom's objectified notions of the commons as "a resource shared by a group of people" (Hess & Ostrom, 2006, p. 4). The new-institutionalist argument that places the political content of the commons alongside the public and private spheres (Ostrom, 2005) is also problematic. There is, in fact, a well-established neo-Marxist strand of thought that shifts the content towards an insurgent connotation and puts the commons "in, against and beyond" the two (Cumbers, 2015, p. 62).

Accordingly, the urban commons are not a mere resource that is collectively managed. They are relational by definition, and the very nature of the social relation between a social group and a resource—a relation that is horizontal, non-commodified and produces a social value to the community—entails a process of empowerment by defending the commons against an iterated process of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2013) and by producing alternative communal economies outside of capitalism as such: e.g. the Commonwealth (Hardt & Negri, 2011) and diverse economies (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020).

An urban commons framework, then, captures much of the debate around contested city space and urban resources (Vv.Aa., 2016), but is ambivalent when it comes to defining what is included within the commons. Recent reviews highlight "a potential for adaptive capacity" (Feinberg et al., 2021, p. 2), but also "diverse invocations of the urban commons" that entail "multiple and contradictory meanings" (Eidelman & Safransky, 2021, p. 800). A key factor here is the conceptual flexibility of the urban commons that enables different struggles to be put on the same, collective, ground of the "right to the city" perspective (Harvey, 2003; Soja, 2010).

2.2 New-municipalist practices and the claim to progressive politics

New municipalism is a growing transnational social movement that originates from Southern Europe—in particular, from the experience of Barcelona (Barcelona en Comú et al., 2019)—and seeks to enable citizens to take back the space of city government by strengthening participatory democracy and reshaping politics beyond the institutional and party dimensions. Its rise is part of a more general transition in urban governance: cities have become again lead actors of economic development (Crouch & Le Galès, 2012) and municipal administrations are "the institutional

forcefield through which capitalist contradictions are mediated, deflected and intensified” (Thompson, 2021, p. 8). This transition has generated interest not only in entrepreneurial solutions, but also in the adoption of new forms of institutional actions that are inspired by the input of a city’s social capital and its social movements.

New municipalism draws extensively on Murray Bookchin’s libertarian municipalism and his elaboration of “face-to-face participatory democracy” (Bookchin et al., 2015, p. 67). Nevertheless, it has evolved from its original content and can hardly be considered as a theory per se. Rather, new municipalism is best understood as a geographically, ideologically and socio-culturally variegated set of practices. Such diversity (see Thompson, 2021 for a systematic review) has also raised concerns that new municipalism is becoming a refined version of urban entrepreneurialism (Lauermann, 2018) that underlies the less clear objective of dissolving the boundaries between the local administration and citizen initiatives in the city (Bianchi, 2019).

Looking at the evolution and outcomes of new-municipalist practices through the lens of political economy, it is evident that these experiences, although rooted in a past of proud competition with state-centric power, have emerged with renewed vigour in response to the crisis of neoliberal regimes and post-2008 austerity municipalism (Aldag et al., 2019; Davies & Blanco, 2017). What is less clear is whether the crisis they are proposing to respond to is “conjunctural” or “organic”. Here, we borrow Gramsci’s distinction between phases of equilibrium breakdown that occur in periods of relative normality—the conjunctural crises—and phases of deeper and more widespread breakdown, in which conflicts multiply, the value system is subverted and an opening appears for new political subjects (Davies, 2021; Jessop, 1997).

This distinction is crucial for a fuller understanding of the course taken by new-municipalist practices and for identifying the mechanisms that have made them successful and long-lasting or, conversely, undermined their effectiveness and led them to be abandoned. In this connection, discussing two Spanish new-municipalist

practices, Bua and Davies draw on urban regime theory and Gramscian analysis and introduce the notion of *incumbency*, which presupposes

The acquisition and effective deployment of coalitional, or relational governing resources. Structurally, it entails the quest to create and control apparatuses of economic, political and societal power. Agentially, it references the political effort involved in developing and sustaining a governing coalition and leveraging the necessary resources to implement an agenda. (2022, p. 5)

However, the previous system of political apparatuses and technical relations is not automatically replaced when a new political regime appears, but may remain in control for some time.

2.3 The urban commons, new municipalism and the shortcomings of participatory democracy

As the commoners seek to reclaim control of urban goods that succumbed to commodification, their political demands and new municipalism can meet on the terrain of local decision-making (Bianchi, 2022a). In particular, progressive advocates argue that the urban commons and new-municipalist practices both inhabit the same territory of action, that of physical proximity (Bianchi, 2019).¹

The belief that physical proximity is a necessary ingredient for a political community and that the local dimension is its “natural” cradle is one of the cornerstones of commons theory and also underlies new-municipalist practices. Nevertheless, some scholars warn against a “conformist civic particularism”, which “expects collective action by communities in particular places and for highly instrumental purposes” (Amin, 2005, p. 615). There is something fideistic about considering the “cohesive local community” as an “empowered and responsible community” which lies on “the energies and resources released by people helping themselves and others, caring for the local built and natural environment, participating in public life, taking responsibility locally through voluntary organisations” (Amin, 2005, p. 617).

Scholars supporting progressive politics argue that the affinity between the urban commons and new municipalism would translate into a shift of the decision-making

centre from the public administration to the participatory space between the municipality and community-based organisations (Milburn & Russell, 2018). Here, again, there is a kind of romanticization of the local community at work. It leads one to think of reciprocity networks as something spatially circumscribed, which work well because they are local, but in itself it is no guarantee of the effectiveness of participatory democracy (Amin, 2005; Purcell, 2006).

The scholarly debate on the role of participatory decision-making in urban planning can help frame these weaknesses. We refer especially to communicative planning, which includes a diverse set of approaches—see the work of Forester (1999), Healey (1997) and Innes (1995) as their most frequently cited representatives—“that share an analytical focus on communication in the micro practices of planning and a normative preference for inclusive dialogues” (Westin, 2022, p. 133). The ensuing debate drew attention to the shortcomings of communicative planning’s core framing of power, with scholars emphasising that it downplays the “dark side” of consensual power. Huxley and Yiftachel, for instance, claim that communicative theory tends to “gloss over contextual understanding of power and material interests, of discourse and the constraints of the taken-for-grantedness of the world” (2000, p. 337).

Thus, we argue that there is a need for in-depth studies of the specific solutions at play in this kind of participatory arrangement. The literature on the urban commons has reflected at length on their potential shortcomings in terms of co-opting and submitting the commons agenda “to a liberal model of democracy in its various forms” (Mattei, 2012; Pinto et al., 2022, p. 6) and the juridical challenges of implementing this agenda (Albanese et al., 2020; De Togni, 2016; Mattei et al., 2010; Micciarelli, 2017). However, there is a gap with regard to some nuances of this process (Bianchi, 2022b; Bianchi et al., 2022) and *how* policy is “made on a field of power struggles between different interests, where knowledge and truth are contested and [...] rationality [...] is exposed as a focus of conflict” (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2004, p. 52).

This paper addresses two of these nuances: first, how the commons are delivered in relation to a specific urban resource and a specific policy; second, how the politics of a progressive municipal government affect the commons' delivery.

3. A methodological note: on the perks of phronetic case studying

This section proposes a research methodology that enables us to detect “the most immediate and the most local power relations” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 123) that make a certain understanding of the urban commons agenda—which could be termed co-optive—possible and rational in the first place. We do so by adopting Flyvbjerg's phronetic approach to case studying (2001, 2004). The aim is not to achieve a formal generalisation of results. In fact, we engage in a reflexive discussion of the status of urban commons values with reference to new-municipalist practices and, crucially, including the issue of power.

More to the point, we refer to a plural understanding of *power to* that includes both *power over* and *power with* dynamics. *Power to* is a pillar of urban regime theory and denotes the “capacity to act and bring resources to bear on the identifying agenda to a degree that would not happen without the arrangements that constitute the regime” (Stone, 2001, p. 21). As “[t]he social ordering of relationships provide[s] actors with varying degrees of dispositional *power to*” (Westin, 2022, p. 137), the latter can be exercised in the form of *power over* others or as consensual *power with* interactions.

This approach allows us to describe a specific approach to municipalist politics and urban commons policy on the basis of direct observable power. In bringing attention to *how* power is exercised, the investigation targets the discursive formations of our case study—i.e. “concerns, concepts, themes and types of statement” (Scott, 2014, p. 178) that emerge from municipalist politics—and questions “what ‘governmental rationalities’ are at work when those who govern govern” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 131). For the case study, this investigation adopts an information-oriented selection of a critical case—i.e. one “having strategic importance in relation to the general problem” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 229)—in the under-researched context of mid-sized cities.

“The academic and activist debate on progressive urban politics tends to be, understandably, drawn to the more dramatic cases of the capital cities and large metropolises” (Beveridge & Naumann, 2021, p. 2). Padova was strategically selected for our case study because it is a mid-sized city where a bipartisan political discourse concerning the city’s social capital goes hand in hand with the advent of a new-municipalist platform and the values forwarded in its urban commons agenda. We document how this agenda was interpreted by the municipalist platform during the decision-making stage of the policy cycle by examining instances of public properties in transition.

Our choices concerning the decision-making stage and instances of public properties in transition are justified by the focus on conflict-power relations and their significance in the study of urban politics (Stone, 2012). Decision-making is a critical stage vis-à-vis the bargaining process by a governing coalition, the different interests at play (Ravazzi & Belligni, 2016) and the budget and capability constraints they face (Jann & Wegrich, 2017). Public properties in transition (i.e. vacant land and structures in a transitory state) are a challenge for municipalist politics and the implementation of the urban commons policy, since conflicts often emerge “between the surrounding community and the local government, which may be hoping to sell abandoned property to private developers and investors” (Foster & Iaione, 2016, p. 302).

To scrutinise these aspects, we selected three vacant public spaces in Padova that were conflictual terrains for implementing the commons agenda. Conflict took the shape of a clash between exchange and use values (Lefebvre, 1996), as citizen-led initiatives began using (or proposing to use) public properties in ways that did not come to terms with private-led interests and those of the municipal administration.

In addition, the differences between the type of urban reuse initiatives that were promoted, the type of actors involved and the governance arrangements that were adopted by the municipal administration allow us to capture the nuances of the relationship between the actors and the material resources under investigation.

As regards data collection, the case study builds on source materials that include urban planning documents, municipal policy reports, city council minutes, political

manifestos, press releases and local newspapers. Detailed information obtained from these sources is triangulated with semi-structured and group interviews with actors involved in the participatory governance process (see Table 1).

In the following pages, we employ the proposed methodology and present an interpretation of the urban commons agenda using a “dubious rationality” strategy (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 135). First, the empirical section records the main events that took place during the formulation of the urban commons policy and the decision-making process for the three instances of property in transition. The discussion section then addresses two discursive formations that challenge the understanding of the urban commons policy as proposed by the municipal administration.

4. Governing a city along the lines of a commons: evidence from new-municipalist Padova

4.1 Rise of a municipalist platform and the formulation of a commons policy

Located in Northeastern Italy, Padova is a mid-sized city of around 200,000 inhabitants whose social capital has gained significant political recognition. The city has recently been acclaimed in bipartisan political discourse, which noted that civil associations are part of “the local DNA” and peaked with Padova’s nomination as European Volunteering Capital in 2020 thanks to its “6,466 associations active in supporting socially and culturally inspired volunteer initiatives” (Comune di Padova, 2020a).

Given this background, the rise of a municipalist platform, Coalizione Civica [Civic Coalition], and its subsequent success during the local elections in 2017 created an opportunity for making a substantial change in governance and bringing the city’s social capital to institutional power in a progressive centre-left coalition.² Indeed, three out of eight members of the new municipal government belonged to Coalizione Civica, and the urban planning councilor (and then platform’s leader) also became deputy mayor.

A key element of Coalizione Civica’s political agenda is the *explicit* reference to the urban commons vocabulary, which is both mentioned in the civic list’s manifesto

with reference to “the gradual and growing involvement [of citizens] in the management processes of the commons” (Coalizione Civica per Padova, 2017) and whose successful delivery represents, according to the list, one of the main achievements as part of the governing coalition:

In the last five years, we have begun to bring grassroots participation, civic protagonism and the re-appropriation of the city and its commons as a working method especially in city administration practices; it's a tiring road, but one that we want to keep going, to widen the spaces. (Coalizione Civica per Padova, 2022b)

Thus, it does not surprise that this aspect is reflected in three of the municipal government's policies.

The first calls for redistributing institutional power by means of participatory decision-making. This translated into the design of different policy instruments, among which Local Agenda 21 plays an important part in our case study as it was applied to two out of the three instances of property in transition.³

The second policy takes a commons-inspired approach to urban space, which translated into Coalizione Civica's promotion of collective reuse of vacant public spaces “that can be put at the service of the community and its associations, which often do not find spaces for sharing” (Coalizione Civica per Padova, 2017a).

The third policy enacts an urban commons regulation. The regulation summarises Coalizione Civica's vision of community governance mechanisms, as it contemplates so-called “collaboration agreements” (Comune di Padova, 2021, p. 7) between civic associations and the administration and the opportunity for civic associations to present a “declaration of civic use” and be recognized as “the community of reference for the care, regeneration and collective management of a common good” (Comune di Padova, 2021, p. 8).

Controversially, however, the regulation was not applied in connection with some vacant public spaces whose historical and cultural significance required the municipality to take a stand on their future use. The areas known as Ex Macello, Ex Foro Boario and Ex Prandina were the most contested cases and created conflicts

between Coalizione Civica and the rest of the governing coalition as well as between Coalizione Civica and its constituency.

4.2 Ex Macello: Padova's ideal urban commons

A former public slaughterhouse from the early twentieth century, Ex Macello is inserted within a 17,000 square metres-large area and located in a central part of the city, nearby the university and the hospital complexes.

Against a lacking maintenance of the site by the municipality—this state being certified by the municipality itself when it zoned Ex Macello as “neglected area” (Il Mattino di Padova, 2008)—the initiatives carried out by a group of local associations under the name of CLAC (Comunità per le Libere Attività Culturali) stand out as an exemplification of Padova's social capital with regard to its long-established institutional backing at local level and its ability to present restoration projects that were financially supported by local private investors (CLAC, 2020; Comune di Padova, 1995).⁴

When the progressive coalition took office in 2017, it inherited the case of Ex Macello and the prospects that it provided for implementing the urban commons agenda as well as commercial redevelopment projects. Labelled by Coalizione Civica as “the ideal urban commons” (Coalizione Civica per Padova, 2020), Ex Macello recalls the commons agenda with reference to two elements: the use of commons spaces through which the city's social capital is ‘allocated’ and the mechanisms of participatory planning that allow the delivery of the urban commons regulation.

As concerns the first element, CLAC's initiatives of cultural reuse and urban solidarities go along with those of maintenance and renovation of Ex Macello's buildings by collaborating with local construction schools and volunteers (CLAC, 2010). With regard to the second element, the reference assembly of Ex Macello was the first case of a group coming forward with the administration and asking for recognition through the new municipal regulation (CLAC, 2021).

However, two events determined the gradual marginalisation of CLAC and the rise of a conflict within Padova's municipalist platform.

The first one relates to the momentum gained by a public-private reuse project that aimed at converting Ex Macello into a science park. In a context where the administration was concerned of “diminished revenues, fewer planning fees and difficulties in divesting of unused public assets” (Il Mattino di Padova, 2018) and stressed the economic relevance of this project as “the most important urban development intervention within our three-year investment plan” (Comune di Padova, 2022; Il Gazzettino di Padova, 2020), Ex Macello’s associations lamented their exclusion from decision-making and the co-planning of what would be realised in the area (CLAC, 2022).

The second event was the eviction of CLAC from Ex Macello because of anomalies within some buildings (Comune di Padova, 2020). This decision by the mayor created not only tensions between the governing coalition and Coalizione Civica, but also between the latter and the associations using Ex Macello as some members of the platform lined up with the mayor’s decision.

Against these arguments, the tactic adopted by Coalizione Civica’s councillors with regard to Ex Macello’s place in the urban commons agenda was that of invoking the institutional solution of the urban commons regulation and, more specifically, that of the declaration of civic use:

“Ex Macello is a common good dedicated to civic use that must remain so. Its future must be decided within the framework of the regulation [...]. Such an important place, whose history cannot be erased, must be made available to citizens immediately.” (Coalizione Civica per Padova, 2022b).

4.3 Ex Foro Boario: a white elephant, but still an elephant!

Ex Foro Boario is a former site for livestock market from the 1960s. Located on the west periphery of Padova, along one of the main roads that give access to the city, Ex Foro Boario represents Padova’s biggest vacant space: with a 120,000 square metres-large building and a surrounding area of 250,000 square metres, it accounts alone for one third of the overall surface of vacant spaces (Pristeri et al., 2018).

Similarly to Ex Macello, also the the story of Ex Foro Boario revolves around the neglect of its owner, the municipal administration, and the existence of two opposing

views over the area so that, eventually, the question of how to reuse it intertwined with Padova's urban commons agenda. Still, because of its monumental size and the costs involved for its renovation, Ex Foro Boario has become a 'white elephant'.

In 2017 the progressive coalition inherited from the previous administration the conflict over the reuse of Ex Foro Boario with regard to two temporary concessions. The first one was oriented towards a commercial reuse and gained momentum as the then municipal administration launched an *ad hoc* call for tenders to recover the area through project financing.⁵

The second one dealt with initiatives of urban solidarities and the concession of a part of the complex to a fair trade civil association aiming to create a Social Economy District (DES) over the area.⁶ However, the municipality had clearly stated its preference over "finding an important economic entity capable of relaunching the whole area in a commercial and public services vocation" (Il Mattino di Padova, 2015) and the DES proposal fell into disgrace.

With the new administration, Ex Foro Boario became an item of Padova's urban commons policy. It did so on the grounds of coming up with a solution through participatory decision-making and that of promoting a bottom-up reuse of the area in "a field, the social economy one, which represents a great opportunity for the city" (Comune di Padova, 2018).

Two main events provide evidence of the dispute within Coalizione Civica on the matter of choosing sides as concerns the administration's decision to persist in the project financing solution.

First, Coalizione Civica's leader proposed to settle the debate through the Agenda 21 procedure. Once approved by the rest of the governing coalition, the Agenda 21 aimed at "allowing modifications and improvements with respect to the project" and discussing the launch of DES (Coalizione Civica per Padova, 2017b). However, it also became clear that there was a flaw on which the Agenda 21 path was structured, that is: agreeing to discuss the DES as if it were part of the redevelopment project "when it was clear from the first day that the potential DES would be built outside the area subject to the tender" (former member of Coalizione Civica #1, personal communication, 15 March 2022).⁷

Second, there is a *confidential* framework agreement that was later disclosed and that involved the investors of the commercial hub project and the University of Padova with regard to “carrying out occasional and/or continuous collaboration activities” in the site (Università di Padova & Leroy Merlin, 2017). The role that was played by the then leader of Coalizione Civica was far from a secondary one. Also, he revealed the existence of this agreement to the municipalist assembly only at a later date (former member of Coalizione Civica #2, personal communication, 15 March 2022).

4.4 Ex Prandina: the litmus test of what Padova will (or will not) be in the future

A former napoleonic barracks, but also the site of a mediaeval monastery and a many-centuried urban garden, Ex Prandina is a 35,000 square metres-large vacant area set in a strategic part of Padova. Indeed, there is one aspect that all its advocates – i.e. civil associations calling for a socially inspired green regeneration and retailer groups demanding a new car park – agree upon: Ex Prandina’s strategic position as an ‘urban hinge’ between centre and periphery.

According to a former urban planning councillor and member of Coalizione Civica, Ex Prandina represents an ideal urban reuse space “that has no equal in our city in terms of size, location and feasibility” (Calimani, 2019). Because of this, Ex Prandina has become the litmus test of what Padova’s urban landscape will (or will not) be in the future and, more specifically, of how to implement the discourse on “the ambitious ecological transition of the city” by means of the urban commons (Gruppo Urbanistica Coalizione Civica, 2019).

Ex Prandina is also a telling representation of “the problematic reflection in terms of management and resources for the city of the healthy growth of the city’s green [and architectural] heritage” (Fregolent & Savino, 2014, p. 113).

Against this background, Prandina was at the top of Coalizione Civica’s urban commons agenda and that of its civil associations constituency (Coalizione Civica per Padova, 2020).⁸ Yet, this reading of Ex Prandina as an urban commons had to confront with an unsolved conflict over uses with regard to an area deemed “so large that you can do more things in it” (Il Mattino di Padova, 2017).

Two main events led to an infighting within the municipalist platform and the rise of

opposing perspectives on how to implement the commons agenda.

First, there are the two different priorities that emerged after the decision to go through participatory decision-making – more specifically, the Agenda 21 tool – in order to “collect proposals to support the drafting of a public tender for the design of the area” (Comune di Padova, 2019a). On the one hand, there was a political decision within Coalizione Civica’s platform that asserted “the regeneration in an environmental, naturalistic and social sense as an indispensable act to maintain the coherence of our political manifesto” (Coalizione Civica per Padova, 2021).⁹ On the other hand, Coalizione Civica advanced a narrative on Prandina as the first and foremost site where participation would occur. Its significance, according to the platform’s leader, would be one “that has never been seen before with other administrations” (Il Mattino di Padova, 2017).

The second event relates to the inefficacy of the Agenda 21 process and the way such inefficacy unfolded. A four month long process, the Agenda 21 for Prandina witnessed “a very wide participation, with 99 adherent realities expressing the social, economic and cultural fabric” (Comune di Padova, 2019a, p. 2).¹⁰ However, despite welcoming with a formal act “the results of Agenda 21, which provides the tools for recovery and reuse of Prandina by the city” (Comune di Padova, 2019b), the municipality decided not to launch the public tender for its future use. Instead, Coalizione Civica’s (new) urban planning councillor claimed its intention “to do a trial period (by installing a paid car park) [...] because we had to consider other elements at play” (A. Ragona, personal communication, 20 April 2022).

5. Two municipalist discourses on the urban commons agenda

The events narrated in the empirical section give an idea of the challenges and ambiguities of new-municipalist politics in interpreting the urban commons agenda. Coalizione Civica can be seen to have deployed two discursive formations in interpreting the ambiguities of the urban commons agenda while consolidating its standing in the governing coalition.

In line with a contextually grounded understanding (Flyvbjerg, 2001), we avoid taking sides with regard to the urban commons values per se. Rather, we present *how*

those interpretations were used tactically in relation to the political framework of a progressive coalition.

5.1 Participatory decision-making as procedural rationality

Participatory decision-making is at the core of a new-municipalist project that calls itself “a laboratory of grassroots politics” (Coalizione Civica per Padova, 2017a, p. 2). In two out of the three instances that we examined (Ex Prandina and Ex Foro Boario), this meant adopting Local Agenda 21 as a means of determining the future uses of a vacant space that Coalizione Civica regarded as a commons. In the third, Ex Macello, Coalizione Civica attempted on several occasions to include a participatory process in the public-private project.

The first discursive formation, then, deals with this aspect of policy. We argue that Coalizione Civica adopted an interpretation based on procedural rationality that emphasised consensual power (i.e. *power with*). The idea that the most effective way to ensure democratic decision-making in urban development processes is by means of legal institutionalisation—so as to prevent uneven power relationships, build mutual understanding among all the actors and, ultimately, establish consensus—is widely discussed in planning theory (Westin, 2022) and recalls Habermas’s discourse ethics (1984).

Especially in the case of Ex Prandina, Coalizione Civica saw participatory decision-making as the ultimate way to build consensus around the space as an urban commons: in the words of Coalizione Civica’s former leader, participation is “a constructive path that involves everyone” (Il Mattino di Padova, 2018) and makes it possible to “tap into the new social and cultural needs of the city” (Il Gazzettino di Padova, 2017).

Even members of Coalizione Civica who were critical of their own councillors believed in the effectiveness of Local Agenda 21 and acknowledged that “the participatory mechanism was handled excellently” (Interview with former member of Coalizione Civica #3, March 15, 2022).

However, the different understandings of the participatory discourse in the cases of Ex Prandina and Ex Foro Boario indicate its tactical use. More to the point, it shows

how adopting a participatory tool that involves *power with* can also be used as a means of achieving *power over* others.

In the first case, Coalizione Civica's urban planning councilor took the fact that the consultation offered different solutions for a single issue, that of the parking space, as a sufficient reason for putting the entire outcome of the Local Agenda 21 process on standby. In other words, the councilor decided to focus on a specific aspect while overlooking the desire expressed by the vast majority of stakeholders to allow "temporary uses associated with Padova's time as European Volunteering Capital" (Comune di Padova, 2019a, p. 2), and claimed that "Agenda 21 did not provide the administration with the desired result, that is, it did not find a univocal solution" (Interview with Padova's urban planning councilor, April 20, 2022).

By contrast, the participatory tool was put to an entirely different use in the case of Ex Foro Boario. Here, Coalizione Civica decided to acknowledge the effectiveness of the Local Agenda 21 procedure despite the fact that the main associations advocating the area's social reuse opposed the final document. As claimed by a member of one of those associations:

We participated in Agenda 21 so that a point of view that was struggling to find a voice [that of the SED] remained on paper. We actually disavowed the final document, as we were not provided with the data we asked for [...] but they told us that it was not possible, that it was not going to be voted on. So we drafted a separate document, which we put out in the press. (Interview with former member of Coalizione Civica and activist, March 15, 2022)

Ex Prandina and Ex Foro Boario, then, provide evidence of the politics of establishing consensus through a participatory institutional solution. The case of Ex Prandina is one in which the will of the majority, which happened to overlap with a reuse of space inspired by Padova's urban commons agenda, was stalemated by a singular, minoritarian issue. The case of Ex Foro Boario, conversely, is one in which the participatory solution was a means of de-escalating and "managing a conflictual situation without having enough political clout to make project proposals" (Interview with the consulting agency representative, March 29, 2022).

In both cases, the associations' proposals for using these spaces were rejected, and the participatory process resulted in a mixed public-private commercial initiative in

Ex Foro Boario (instead of an operation linked to alternative food networks) and a temporary parking lot in Ex Prandina (instead of a green regeneration project in line with the principles of ecological transition).

5.2 One can make amends to the other: the urban commons regulation and participatory decision-making

The question of actually being able to influence the municipal government's choices is critical in all three instances. As confirmed by the representative of the consulting agency for Local Agenda 21:

The existing constraints are crucial: it is fine to be consulted, but we must also account for the input from the participatory process. That is, being able to influence the choices and, if these are not accepted, explain why. (Interview with the responsible of consulting agency, March 29, 2022)

The second discursive formation deals with the tactical use of the two institutional approaches for the urban commons agenda. Top-down definitions of the urban commons through participatory decision-making—on the one hand—and their institutional acknowledgement by means of the declaration of civic use—on the other—are potentially conflicting. We argue that the new-municipalist platform adopted an interpretation based on the idea that one approach can “make amends” to the other and that aimed to avoid conflict during the decision-making stage.

The problem of conflict is well-known in both political and planning practice, with scholars citing politicians' “aversion towards confrontation” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 7) and planners' avoidance of conflict, which is “described as non-productive, rather than debilitating, since citizen protest often emerges very late after projects have been approved” (Kühn, 2021, p. 148).

Coalizione Civica's discretionary adoption of two different institutional approaches—urban commons regulation and participatory decision-making—is particularly telling in this respect, as the case of Ex Macello shows. Here, the urban planning councilor touted their seamless integration and claimed that:

The associations who oppose the operation [i.e. the public-private project and the suspected lack of participation] cannot actually complain, and in fact they are the same associations that have also submitted a request to use the space under the terms of the urban commons regulation, which is a tool that the administration itself created. (Interview with Padova's urban planning councilor, April 20, 2022)

Thus, Ex Macello—the urban commons that became “Padova's most widely discussed commons without even having been put on the official list” (Il Mattino di Padova, 2022a)—takes both institutional approaches into account although neither have been implemented so far.

First, it was the turn of the participatory approach, with both Padova's mayor and Coalizione Civica's councilor announcing their willingness “to start a participation process that will be managed by third party actors” and even specifying the preferred consulting agency (Il Mattino di Padova, 2020). It was promised that this approach would be a means of accommodating the associations' demands regarding the public-private project. However, it fell into disfavour, as it was unsuited to the bargaining process for the public-private project, which the municipal government called “the most important initiative of our three-year investment plan” (Il Gazzettino di Padova, 2020). Thus, when it became clear that the main aspects of the project had already been decided, the participatory approach was no longer a viable option.

As the participatory approach lost its appeal, Coalizione Civica announced that the urban commons regulation would be “the framework within which the future of Ex Macello must be decided” (Coalizione Civica per Padova, 2022). However, it is questionable whether the proposed declaration of civic use was able to overcome the shortcomings of the participatory approach. A group of actors involved in the social reuse of Ex Macello filed a proposal, but the latter ended up revealing that the municipal administration did not intend to jeopardise the public-private project. More to the point, Coalizione Civica's councilors called for an approach that entailed “parcelling out” the areas of Ex Macello that could be regarded as a commons.

We can thus see that there are *power over* actions in two institutional tools—the urban commons regulation and Local Agenda 21—that on paper are supposed to

empower local associations by including them in well-designed participatory solutions. Even more critically, it seems that “the relationship between *power over* and consensual *power with* is not merely one where it is desirable that the latter replaces the former” (Westin, 2022, p. 150).

6. New municipalism, the commons policy and the long-standing challenges of progressive politics

The voter appeal of a new-municipalist platform, Coalizione Civica, and the rise of a coalition in which this platform was the second-most important political group was a turning point in Padova’s move towards progressive politics. The new administration promoted not only a new political vocabulary, that of the Fearless Cities movement (Barcelona en Comú et al., 2019), but also new institutional approaches, as shown by the formulation of an urban commons agenda and the adoption of an urban commons regulation.

Vacant public spaces proved to be a crucial resource for the urban commons and the demand for culturally and socially inspired urban reuse initiatives. In this connection, Coalizione Civica’s willingness to address “the abundance of vacant spaces owned by the municipality, which should be revitalised” (Coalizione Civica per Padova, 2017a) offered a bridge “across formal and informal politics” (Beveridge & Naumann, 2021, p. 8).

However, the case of Padova and its progressive coalition’s clear lack of *incumbency* show the weakness of new-municipalist practices when they face the long-standing power dynamics of local politics (Béal et al., 2023). These challenges include outright forms of *power over*, such as negotiated decision-making and the confidential agreements behind it, as well the forms “concealed” under the guise of *power with* institutional approaches.

In their different ways, all three instances of vacant public spaces reflect the persistent influence of the old urban regime—municipal government, technical apparatuses and a consolidated system of interests—on the decision-making processes of the new centre-left municipal administration. In other words, the transition from the previous political regime to the next one seems to testify to the

ability to influence public action on the part of the old elites, which can continue to exert indirect power by exploiting the hegemonic levers within the apparatuses and society.

Ex Foro Boario is a telling example, as members of Coalizione Civica naively overlooked a confidential framework agreement that also involved their party leader, private investors and an anchor institution such as the city's university.

It also tells of the inevitable tensions that these mechanisms produced for Coalizione Civica's constituency and its claim to embody a new way of doing politics.

Overall, it appears that the reproductive mechanisms of institutional power *can* work alongside the commons vocabulary and a progressive coalition *can* promote the urban commons narrative through a dedicated policy while “resolving” the ambiguities of the urban commons agenda. What remains open to question are its normative implications: e.g. how practices viewed as rational and legitimate according to the municipal government's self-understanding may not be equally so in the context of other horizons of meaning.

The two discursive formations that we discussed in this article—first, a procedural interpretation of participatory decision-making that justifies the coexistence of the urban commons and public-private solutions, and second, the discretionary use of participatory decision-making and the urban commons regulation as a means of avoiding conflict—are telling of the connections that exist between *power over* and *power with* actions.

Finally, the existence (or lack) of regime *incumbency* puts another perspective on the claims that things would be different if a new-municipalist ticket were the only governing party. Two points belie these claims. First, coalition governments are a likely scenario, if not indeed the most likely, and this is also true of progressive politics (Janoschka & Mota, 2021). Second, even “fully new-municipalist” governments have to come to terms with similar constraints and accommodate different demands and interests as shown, for instance, by the new-municipalist experience of Barcelona en Comú (Blanco et al., 2020) and that of other platform-oriented Spanish confluences (Martínez & Wissink, 2022).

Table 1 – Overview of the interviews.

Actor	Instances covered	Location/date	Format	Duration
Former member of Coalizione Civica #1	Ex Macello, Ex Foro Boario, Ex Prandina	Online, March 15, 2022	Group interview	1 hour and 30 minutes
Former member of Coalizione Civica #2				
Former member of Coalizione Civica #3				
Former member of Coalizione Civica #4				
Former member of Coalizione Civica and activist				
Padova's urban planning councilor	Ex Macello, Ex Foro Boario, Ex Prandina	Online, April 20, 2022	Semi-structured interview	40 minutes
Member of CLAC #1	Ex Macello	Online, January 13, 2022	Group interview	2 hours
Member of CLAC #2				
Member of CLAC #3				
Ex Foro Boario activist	Ex Foro Boario	Padova, March 10, 2022	Semi-structured interview	1 hour and 30 minutes
Expert in participatory processes and activist	Ex Macello	Online, January 26, 2022	Semi-structured interview	1 hour and 10 minutes
Expert in participatory processes and	Ex Macello, Ex Foro Boario, Ex Prandina	Online, December 20, 2021	Semi-structured interview	45 minutes

member of Coalizione Civica				
Representative of the consulting agency in charge for Agenda 21	Ex Macello, Ex Foro Boario, Ex Prandina	Online, March 29, 2022	Semi-structured interview	1 hour

Notes

1. We are aware of the reach of the proximity concept, especially in regional studies and economic geography (Boschma, 2005). For this reason, it should be specified that we rely upon a general understanding of proximity as involving exclusively the local dimension of the urban commons and new-municipalist practices.

2. Coalizione Civica belongs to the global, new-municipalist movement of Fearless Cities. In the “Guide to the Global Municipalist Movement” edited by Barcelona en Comú, Coalizione Civica is defined as “an open and autonomous project that aims to engage citizens, as well as civic, social, economic and local political forces, with the aim of constructing a new and alternative political project” (2019, p. 165). Its manifesto sets out the goal of establishing a new citizen platform and advocates horizontal subsidiarity, collaboration and polycentrism as design principles (Coalizione Civica per Padova, 2017a). The platform rose in 2017 as part of a wider political phenomenon of leftist candidates running on non-party affiliated tickets in Northeastern Italy that mobilised local associations, volunteers and intellectuals. At the beginning, Coalizione Civica was spearheaded by a University of Padova professor. His charismatic leadership was key for Coalizione Civica’s success at the polls. However, the relationship between the ticket and its leader deteriorated when he decided to run for the local regional elections in 2020, after which he also resigned from his positions as urban planning councilor and deputy mayor of Padova.

3. Local Agenda 21 is a policy instrument that was first implemented in Padova in the early 2000s and was then revamped by the new progressive government in 2017. It was born from the first global conferences on sustainable cities and, as a result, it seeks to mobilise local activities to face the global challenge of sustainability. Local Agenda 21 is a means of encouraging community participation on the basis of the following principles: “involving not only established groups in the consultation; not giving the process an antagonistic character; involving external mediators in the consultations; encouraging the contribution of new groups; reflecting local interests and priorities” (Comune di Padova, 2015).

4. After the slaughterhouse closure in 1975, the site entered a new phase in which the reuse made by CLAC compensated for the unwillingness of the municipality to decide over its future. Although the occupation was never settled by means of a permanent concession, the municipality supported on different occasions the associations' initiatives (CLAC, 2010) and tacitly acknowledged, in the words of Coalizione Civica's advocates, "a forty year long social laboratory that has hosted cultural, recreational and solidarity associations that have created synergies and collaborations, making that space alive and, ultimately, allowing its reuse" (Coalizione Civica per Padova, 2022a).

5. In 2009 the municipal administration awarded a ten-year concession for a concert venue next to the Ex Foro buildings. This orientation towards a private-led reuse gained momentum when in 2016 a major retail firm got interested in opening a commercial hub there and, together with the concert venue company, filed a project proposal "for the redevelopment and re-functionalisation of the whole area" – including "the construction of new buildings" (Gruppo Urbanistica Coalizione Civica, 2020).

6. Since 2004 part of the Ex Foro complex has been granted on free loan to a fair trade civil association that has been working at the creation of an alternative food supply chain. Joining the efforts of other associations, the group also presented a project proposal for creating a DES over the area (Altragricoltura Nordest, 2014).

7. Similar doubts were confirmed even by those institutionalised actors in charge of the mediation process: "as part of the Agenda 21, we did not have a conversation regarding the agreements between the administration and the investors. We found ourselves working in a context in which we did not have the possibility to guide the choices of the administration, as the administration had already made its choice." (M. Mascia, personal communication, 29 March 2022).

8. According to the municipalist platform leader, Prandina represented a site where "it is crucial to return a large part of the area to activities of interest to the whole community" (Il Mattino di Padova, 2018a), to "intercept the new social and cultural needs" and where "the city must reclaim its spaces" (Il Gazzettino di Padova, 2017); not to mention that its constituency called for "a process of knowledge and

re-appropriation of the place, also through temporary uses of existing buildings and spaces” and highlighted “the relevance of the contribution of the world of associations and volunteering to create a highly characterised and attractive cultural centre” (Associazione Prandina Bene Comune & Legambiente Padova et al., 2020).

9. According to a former member of the platform, Prandina was “a very specific target of Coalizione Civica. We had also held an assembly on this subject [...] and this programme, which was ours at the time, had then also become that of the majority of Agenda 21” (member of Gruppo Urbanistica #2, personal communication, 15 March 2022).

10. Its effectiveness was confirmed also by the external mediator, who estimated “overall, 360 days of commitment by stakeholders” (M. Mascia, personal communication, 29 March 2022) – and “the identification of temporary use functions [...] within the context of Padova European Volunteering Capital” (Comune di Padova, 2019a, p. 2).

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Concluding remarks

Reading current patterns of urban transformation: the crucial entanglement of *power to*, *power with* and *power over* dynamics within “new” forms of governance

The ever changing nature of forms of urban transformation constantly challenges our readings of such phenomena. In this thesis I reflected on how urban geography, which has a long history of theories that attempt to understand urban development, can benefit from the input given by a “political sociology of governance” (Le Galès, 2013, 2017). Responding to the call for an “eclectic perspective” (Hall, 2006, p. 34), this thesis offers evidence of the capacity of urban geography to embrace insights from other social disciplines such as political science, urban planning and criminology and, in so doing, to provide new perspectives on the practices and spatialities of urban transformation.

The main argument developed in this thesis is that the relation between “power to” (i.e. an actor’s capacity to act), “power with” (i.e. consensual interactions between actors) and “power over” (i.e. domination of an actor over another one) dynamics offers a valuable toolkit through which to explore “new” forms of governance that shape urban transformation. When put into action as for the specific issues explored by the three papers, this toolkit allows to come up with findings of a theoretical nature (as in the case of Paper 1) as well as of an empirical one (as in Paper 2 and Paper 3) with regard to:

- The possibility to read current patterns of urban transformation through urban regime analysis and, crucially, by challenging “dualistic” readings in which what occurs in the Global North is the norm and whatever happens outside of it is labelled as a Global South exception. In this regard, Paper 1 argues that issues such as “power to”, agenda definition and who controls the resources needed to deploy such agenda are not just a Western issue. Still, it remains crucial to find ways to account for context and the paper gives evidence that a “contamination” of urban politics with urban geography can add significantly.

- The possibility of questioning which actors are involved in processes of urban transformation by including the legal realm as well as the illegal one. Paper 2 offers insight in this regard and, more specifically, on how to read the role of illegal actors such as organised criminal groups in terms of the “power with” and “power over” mechanisms that characterise the “grey area” in which they collaborate with (legal) public and private actors. In doing so, the paper also acknowledges the relevance of territorially-embedded mafias in the production of urban space beyond the areas where they originate and by forms of so-called “hybrid governance”.
- The possibility of bridging urban regime analysis with an interest in power-rationality relations. In this regard, Paper 3 provides an example of how to examine “power over” practices that are concealed under the guise of “power with” institutional solutions and the rationales through which these power mechanisms materialise within the context of so-called “regeneration” of urban spaces.

Two considerations help reading the “explorative” insights that emerge from the thesis. First, it is important to remember what characterises such “new” governance perspectives. Indeed, it is not the forms of collective action and the exercise of power that are so “new” and, in this sense, it may as well be that forms of “governance” have always existed. Rather, a power-informed perspective such as the one of a “political sociology of governance” allows us to take a fresher, “new” look at dynamics of collective action and capacity to act that cannot be taken for granted and that—like in the case of hybrid forms of governance explored by Paper 2—may be labelled by part of the literature as “exceptions that confirm the rule”.

Second, it is important to highlight the urban dimension of the issues of transformation under study and how these are explored by trying to avoid the “methodological trap of localism” (Brenner, 2009, p. 122). This is, arguably, a key geographical element of the thesis and allows a twofold operation that includes the goals of accounting for dynamics that are occurring at a broader scale while considering how such global dynamics do not “operate according to immutable laws no matter where they are unleashed” (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, p. 351).

In Paper 1, this is the case of the issue of the rise of homogenised, postpolitical (neoliberal) city models—i.e. ones where policy agendas focus on projects that aim to make cities more “attractive”, “smart” or “sustainable” (Davidson & Iveson, 2015) and how this affects cities outside “the West”. Also Paper 2 accounts for urban phenomena occurring at a broader scale. It does so by taking into consideration the effect of a global tendency such as the new public management rationale on peripheral municipalities and providing evidence of how mafias can exploit the shortcomings of the implementation of such a rationale. Finally, in Paper 3 I consider the rise of new municipalist practices as a global phenomenon that is affecting “progressive” politics in arguably different ways in major and global cities on the one hand and small and mid-sized ones on the other.

Study limitations and future research directions

Looking at possible future research directions and acknowledging limitations, it is worth emphasising that this PhD thesis does not aim to provide a comprehensive analysis neither of urban transformation nor of urban governance theory. The thesis was, in fact, directed at providing a conceptual toolkit through which to bring clarity to different issues and perspectives of urban transformation that emerge when looking at local mechanisms of power.

Against this background, the thesis was informed by an exploratory approach. Thus, the research design leaves ample room for further studies and directions to be followed.

The exploratory approach followed by the three papers allows us to grasp relations and possible new interpretations of practices and spatialities of power in urban transformation. However, since the thesis is designed as a collection of individual papers that revolve around separate issues and contexts, a first limitation of the thesis is that it is not possible to draw comparisons between the three papers.

Despite this, there is the possibility to extend the analysis of said practices and spatialities—e.g. through quantitative research and comparative qualitative studies.

As for quantitative research, it has got the potential to add consistency and robustness to the trends that emerge from the thesis. Paper 2 offers a good example

in this respect. The work identifies some structural features that give incentives for processes of criminal accumulation by dispossession in the urban development of Italian peripheral areas. These findings would benefit from quantitative analysis too. Specifically, the Italian Revenue Agency provides data on real estate transactions and the consistency of assets. It would be interesting to discuss these trends and confront them with the evidence collected in the two case studies examined by the paper and, possibly, to cross-check them with trends in other peripheral areas of Italy.

The thesis would also benefit from integrating with comparative qualitative studies. Paper 3, for instance, is based on an in-depth analysis of power-rationality relations with regard to a single case study. It would be interesting to compare these results by expanding field research to other experiences of progressive urbanism in mid-sized cities in and beyond Italy. This would allow us to capture, at least partially, diversity by selecting cases with a different political profile or socio-economic trajectory.

When looking at the empirical part of the thesis (i.e. Paper 2 and Paper 3), its geographical settings represent another limitation: both the papers have a focus on practices and spatialities that occur in the Global North and, even more specifically, the Italian context. The practical reasons that led to this selection—i.e. easier access to primary and secondary data and a better knowledge of that context given by the authors' background—do not undermine the validity of the findings.

As I explained in the Introduction chapter, the specificities of the Italian cases studied by the thesis—i.e. the territorially-embedded presence of Italian mafias, the issue of corruption in urban development (as for Paper 2) and the legacy of radical politics (as for Paper 3) may even be treated as “anomalies” within the broader context of western Europe. This does not seem to be the case though, and I argued how the “Italian exception” is, at most, a “hyper representation” of broader trajectories of urban transformation, especially when looking at issues of urban governance and their power dynamics.

It would also be interesting to consider the relevance of these findings beyond the narrow confines of the urban contexts under study. In this regard, both the issue of criminal infiltration of urban development and the one of the power-rationality

relations in progressive urbanism can be scaled up in terms of geographical relevance. As for Paper 1, there is a well-established literature that indicates the transnational nature of OCGs (and Italian mafia-type ones in particular).

As for Paper 2, despite new municipalism—i.e. the specific branch of progressive politics being studied in the paper—was born as a southern European phenomenon, there is evidence that it has recently expanded beyond the European continent and reached contexts beyond the Global North one too.

Overall, this thesis represents only a first step in examining practices and spatialities of power in urban transformation and, thus, does not aim to be comprehensive. Further research should be pursued in the directions listed above as well as in the concluding sections of each paper.