

SAINT MARK'S SQUARE AS CONTESTED POLITICAL SPACE: PROTESTING CRUISE TOURISM IN VENICE

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ABSTRACT: Saint Mark's Square is unquestionably the most famous tourist attraction in Venice, a *piazza* characterised by its complex history, unique aesthetics and many allusions to power (given its proximity to the Doge's Palace and Saint Mark's Basilica). This square is the largest open space in the city and while it is routinely crowded with tourists from all over the world, political demonstrations have been prohibited since 1997. This article explores Saint Mark's Square as a contested political space by focusing on the many local struggles against cruise tourism in Venice and its lagoon. Instead of constituting an 'apolitical' space, the preferred uses given to the square by local authorities and tourism stakeholders are manifestly 'political', producing a space of leisure and consumption that benefits the economic logic behind the 'normal' functioning of the *piazza*. Other alternative social and political uses of the square are not only discouraged but banned, which brings into discussion the Lefebvrian notion of the right to the city: who has access to the centre as a (political) privileged space? The article examines protest acts undertaken by the collective No Grandi Navi, particularly the political events that took place after the *MSC Opera* collision with another tourist vessel and the dock in June 2019.

KEYWORDS: public sphere, protest, cruise tourism, policing, urban spaces.

Introduction: Global mass tourism and Venice as a 'tourist' city

In June 2020, while the coronavirus pandemic forced many cities and tourist destinations to impose harsh lockdowns, dozens of cruise ships were stranded at Manila Bay in the Philippines (Fonbuena and McCormick, 2020). Thousands of cruise workers were stuck inside the ships, facing uncertainty about their chances to return home and their future employment within the industry, while suicides and hunger strikes were also reported (Nevett, 2020; Carr, 2020). Several media outlets paid close attention to cruise tourism during the first months of the pandemic, describing the evolution of the contagion in ships such as the *Diamond Princess* or the *Westerdam*, while tracking the border closures and port denials that followed the global spread. In the French Indian Ocean territory of Réunion, panicked and angry locals protested the arrival of the *Sun Princess* by burning rubbish containers and throwing rocks at the police (Bartirolo, 2020).

Before the pandemic, Venice expected to receive circa 470 cruise ships in 2020, with an estimate of 1.52 million cruise passengers (Pozzo, 2019). Not unlike the episode in Réunion, some of these big cruises visiting the city have been met with protests by local inhabitants, not because they were afraid of a deathly virus (they might be today) but because of the many other externalities associated to the normal functioning of the cruise industry, namely: air

pollution, erosion caused by ship wakes, electromagnetic interference, noise and overcrowding. On a regular day (generally a weekend), one could witness hundreds of tourists standing on the decks of a luxury cruise ship, photographing and filming Saint Mark's Square while entering or leaving the city.

In recent years (mainly after 2014), the global media debate (expressed in newspapers, TV broadcasts, independent blogs, tourism publications, podcasts, YouTube channels, Twitter accounts, Facebook pages and other media channels) has extensively discussed the emergence of anti-tourist sentiments in many travel destinations across the world, particularly through the use of buzzwords such as 'overtourism' or 'tourismphobia'. These media texts allude to a 'crisis' that was not new, one that many academic publications and specialised reports have analysed under more neutral terms such as "visitor pressure" (Koenigs et al, 2018), "carrying capacity" (UNWTO, 2018) or "hard tourism" (Wackermann, 1997: 38). In this debate, Venice is often considered the "worst-case scenario" (Russo and Scarnato, 2018: 464), with many cities trying to devise strategies for adaptation and mitigation in order to avoid becoming 'another Venice'. Barcelona mayor Ada Colau declared in 2015 that the hope for her city was to avoid "ending up like Venice" (Kassam, 2015: online), which prompted a harsh response by Venice's Mayor Luigi Brugnaro.

This disagreement continued in 2018, when a similar statement by Colau was answered by Brugnaro, who at the time declared that those who protested mass tourism in Venice were a "minority," while in Barcelona they "had elected a Mayor" (Savio, 2018: online). However, in Venice, many social movements and citizens shared this concern about mass tourism, denouncing that the city was becoming a theme-park, that the 'authenticity' of local life was being lost and that the touristification of the city compromised the residents' quality of life. In June 2018, hundreds took the streets and rallied from Piazzale Roma to Campo Manin demanding an alternative future for the city, a 'dignified Venice'. Among the many causes identified in the banners announcing the rally, the effective removal of big cruise liners from the Venetian lagoon was emphasised. Other motives included the protection of cultural heritage, the repopulation of the city, the creation of new jobs and the need for social housing.

Seraphin et al (2018: 374) state that these movements in Europe imply a change of paradigm, given that "[l]ocals are now more interested in their quality of life than the income generated by the tourism industry." Colomb and Novy (2017: 6-7) observe that tourism is "fundamentally political," that only a few places remain "whose cultures, economies, social relations and spatial dynamics are not impacted by tourism" and that the boundaries between "tourist and non-tourist practices in cities" have blurred, as "a result of increasing global mobility, a growing fluidity between travel, leisure and migration, a breakdown of the conventional binary divide between work and leisure" and "changes in the consumption patterns and preferences of middle- and upper-class city dwellers."

The impact of mass tourism in Venice is difficult to summarise in a few lines. With 51.208 inhabitants remaining in the historic centre (Comune di Venezia, 2020),¹ the city has a serious scarcity of affordable housing, which intensifies the exodus of residents, generally attributed to high rents and the popularity of tourist rentals (such as Airbnb²). The shutting

¹ Settis (2014: 10) compares this depopulation to the aftermath of the plague of 1630, after which the city had circa 98.000 inhabitants. The current number is significantly lower.

² A report by Tantucci (2019) used *InsideAirbnb* data to suggest that Venice was the top city for Airbnb in terms of "average monthly collection" (an estimated 1118 Euros) with 7,870 apartments listed.

down of local businesses and their substitution with tourist-oriented stores has also been documented³. Local media often publish stories about collapsing infrastructure due to overcrowding, especially public transport services such as *vaporetti* (waterbuses) and several bus lines connecting Venice with nearby communities in the mainland, such as Mestre and Marghera (Munaro, 2019a; Chiarin, 2019). Among the users affected by the recurring overcrowded buses between Venice and the mainland are the workers of Fincantieri (Sperandio, 2018), a shipbuilding company that specialises in luxury cruise liners (and naval vessels).⁴

Other issues of conviviality have emerged in relation to mass tourism in Venice, including temporary disorder resulting from public urination, lovelocks on bridges, abandoned trash, noise, drunkenness and drug consumption. Local authorities have responded with the campaign #EnjoyRespectVenezia (Città di Venezia, 2018) to create awareness about these unwanted behaviours (as well as to punish those who break the rules) (Araya López, 2020)⁵. Environmental issues are also at the centre of the debate against uncontrolled mass tourism, including concerns about water pollution, air pollution and the hopeless future of the city due to irreversible sea level rise linked to human-driven climate change (Liefgreen, 2019).

Many citizen organisations have emerged in the last years to denounce the negative impacts of global mass tourism in Venice and to propose new, alternative visions of the city, including the Assemblée Sociale per la Casa, Gruppo25Aprile, Poveglia per Tutti, La Vida, Generazione '90, Collettivo Universitario Li.S.C., OCIO Venezia⁶ and other organisations from the mainland communities of Mestre and Marghera, such as Loco Laboratorio Occupato Contemporaneo or Marghera Libera e Pensante. Although these collectives might have a specific goal regarding the future of Venice (for example, the protection of the abandoned island of Poveglia is the main objective of Poveglia per Tutti – see Cavallo and Visentin, 2021), all these organisations have engaged in a joint struggle against the externalities of the global tourism industry (and the extractivism⁷ that it represents), being able to 'move' from one problem to another, therefore understanding these adverse effects as necessarily interconnected.

³ The project Laboratorio Venezia, led by Laura Fregolent and her team at the Università Iuav di Venezia, has mapped and analysed these physical transformations of Venice. The data is available (in Italian) at: <http://arcg.is/48G9C>. Bertocchi and Visentin (2019) provide a similar analysis of these changes with regard to accommodation, restaurants and bars, and shops for the period 2008-2019. The authors conclude that these transformations are evident in all six districts of the historical centre of Venice.

⁴ Fincantieri reported 5.849 million Euros in revenues for 2019, considering itself the "PRINCIPAL western shipbuilder: with "230+ years of history", as stated in their Annual Report 2019 (Fincantieri, 2019a).

⁵ My research has critically discussed these campaigns against the so-defined 'anti-social' behaviour of tourists in Venice, Amsterdam and Barcelona. The article also examines the role that these campaigns for 'decorum' and 'respect' could have in restricting the freedoms of local inhabitants, particularly in regard to the use of shared, public spaces.

⁶ Cavallo (2016: 125) explains the emergence of such social movements in the Veneto region, linking them to broader characteristics such as local tradition, family networks and their connection to land/water.

⁷ Salerno (2018) analyses this social resistance as part of a countermovement against the *touristification* and *museification* of the city, which relies on an extractivist logic (related to the idea of 'accumulation by dispossession'). In this sense, there are powerful economic actors interested in monetising value from the historical core of Venice, which accelerates the destruction of the physical/natural environment or the local social tissue (for example, by substituting the inhabitants of the city with temporary users).

This article focuses on the diverse protest acts against the presence of 'big cruises' in Venice, which are commonly associated to the collective No Grandi Navi. However, as mentioned before, other collectives and unaffiliated citizens have actively participated in the protests mentioned in this text. In order to reflect on the idea of the right to the city, as originally proposed by Lefebvre and with the later re-interpretations by Harvey (2008, 2012), Attoh (2011) or Purcell (2002, 2003), this article discusses a series of protest acts that captured both local and international media attention since the beginning of the collective in 2012. Specifically, this article addresses the massive demonstration 'Ora Basta! Mai Più' (It's Enough! Never Again) that congregated around 10.000 participants at Saint Mark's Square on June 8th 2019 (Figure 1). The march was the direct result of the collision of the cruise ship *MSC Opera* with a dock (and docked tourist vessel) on the Giudecca canal on June 2nd 2019.



Figure 1 – Route of the *Ora Basta!* Protest. (Created by the author with uMap.)

The main thesis discussed here is that Saint Mark's Square is a contested political space. On the one hand, the square has been constructed as 'apolitical' ('no protest' zone) by local authorities and tourism stakeholders interested in using and maintaining this space as a centre for leisure and consumption. On the other hand, various collectives and citizens/inhabitants critical of mass tourism aim at re-appropriating the square for political and social uses, while challenging powerful national and global forces that have appropriated this space. In terms of the right to the city, these alternative visions of the city revive the Lefebvrian question about who has the right to the centre as a (political) privileged space, providing an opportunity to discuss and theorise what this right means (Attoh, 2011) and how it could be effectively safeguarded.

The article has been divided into four sections. First, the Lefebvrian notion of the right to the city is revisited, with a specific interest in discussing the centre of the city⁸ as a legitimate place for urban dissent. Second, a short summary of the negative effects and the impact of cruise tourism in Venice is presented, followed by a description of the main protest acts organised by the No Grandi Navi collective. Third, the political uses of Saint Mark's Square are examined, with references to the events that took place in the summer of 2019 and afterwards. The last section offers some conclusions and provides recommendations for further research on the subject, both for protest in Venice and for other political/touristic spaces.

The right to the city: the centre as (political) privileged space

This is a Venice of times gone by, a kind of village with simple, quiet folk, no barbarians. At night I go to Saint Mark's Square at 2 a.m. when it's finally empty. Because it is always full of barbarians. (Tudy Sammartini, in Andreas Pilcher's film *Das Venedig Prinzip*, 2012, 0:19:23)

In his essay on the right to the city, Lefebvre identified that this right “would also cover the right to the use of the centre, a privileged space” instead of maintaining inhabitants “stuck in ghettos” (1996: 34). The word *ghetto* is allegedly derived from the Jewish ghetto in Venice, which designed a space of “mandatory segregation” (Schwartz, 2019). If one follows the many protest acts occurring in Venice during the last years, the idea that local inhabitants are being segregated due to a series of local and national policies privileging the global tourism industry would appear sooner or later. In many media texts and community discussions, tourism is perceived as a colonising force that threatens to turn this historic city into a theme park⁹. For Lefebvre, the right to the city was essential to secure a lived space “where exchange would not go through exchange value, commerce and profit?” (1996: 148). His idea of the city is a place where both participation and appropriation (in terms of use value) are expected and welcomed.

There has been a protracted debate about the definition and the limits of the notion of ‘the right to the city’ in academic literature. The ‘right’ is indeed also popular among social movements campaigning for various causes, and it has been used/appropriated by several NGOs and international bodies (Kuymulu, 2013; Mayer, 2009). Harvey (2001, 2008, 2012), in his reflections on space, the city, and the ‘right to the city’ has indicated that the questions about *what kind of city inhabitants want* should not be separated from “what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire” (2008: 23). While ‘the city’ is produced following a “spatial rationality” (2001: 81) that is oriented to serve the needs of capital (i.e. to secure the flows of capital, information, commodities or workers and consumers), instead of allowing alternative uses and ways to “produce space” (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]); the ‘right to the city’ is a claim for appropriating the city, for accessing the resources that it embodies, and for changing it and reinventing it (Harvey, 2012: 4).

⁸ There is a vast debate on the Italian concept of *centro storico*, which relates to issues of heritage preservation, gentrification, urban planning and tourism resistance. For a discussion of the normative protecting historical centres, see Bravo and Mingucci (2008). On the specific case of Venice and the physical and perceptive wear factors, see Codello et al (2014).

⁹ The Facebook group Venezia NON è Disneyland is one of the many digital spaces that function as ‘public squares’ for discussing both the city and its future (and for documenting the ‘unruly’ behaviour of visitors).

The 'we' of the city is a complex collective to define, but the debate over the 'right to the city' tends to overcome the idea of *belonging* by virtue of citizenship by favouring the idea of *inhabitancy* (i.e. those who actually live and produce the city), regardless of their status as members of the relevant state. Are the (migrant) workers of both Fincantieri and the Port of Venice (not) included in the discussions about the future of the city? Purcell (2002) has addressed the new politics inherent in the right to the city with regard to the urban politics of the inhabitant and has raised several questions about the limits of this right, for example, by pointing out ambiguities regarding *scalar politics* – such as, what if the decisions taken in Oaxaca affect the right to the city of 'citizens' in Los Angeles? Do they (Angelenos) have a right to participate in the processes that produce urban space in Oaxaca? (Purcell, 2002: 104). While this example proposes a conflict across borders, it is similar to the complex relationship between those who inhabit Venice and those who inhabit Mestre, which is extremely relevant given that the two communities/cities are part of the same political unit, and that recently re-elected Mayor Brugnaro enjoys a clear popularity in the mainland while suffering harsh criticism for his decisions and management of 'the city' in the historic core of Venice.

Purcell (2002, 2003: 577) considers the right to the city to include two main components: a) *the right to appropriate* urban space and b) *the right to participate* centrally in the production of urban space. Over the years, the No Grandi Navi collective has attempted to exercise both rights, by occupying *places* that have been dedicated to global mass tourism (i.e. Saint Mark's square, the Giudecca canal) and by inserting themselves in the conversation about the future of the city. In this sense, and relating it to the statement from one of the protagonists of the documentary *Das Venedig Prinzip* ('The Venice Syndrome') (Pichler, 2012) included above, the local inhabitants that have been segregated/expelled from the city¹⁰, those who suffer the side effects that the global tourism industry imposes upon them, practice their right to the city by making themselves visible in *acts of embodiment* that might be read as a form of "spatial politics of affect" (Thrift 2004) and which oftentimes requires them to engage in 'radical' practices of civil or democratic disobedience (Celikates, 2016; Markovits, 2005). These protest acts aim at correcting perceived *democratic deficits*, and they *take place* at various sites of intervention (Routledge, 2017: 19-21), including sites of *destruction* (places of resource extraction), of *consumption* (the dominant and destructive role of consumerism), of *assumption* (challenging underlying beliefs and the control of mythologies), of *decision* (where key decisions are made) and of *circulation* (to disrupt the flow of resources, traffic and personnel, including tourists). All these sites of intervention in Venice could also be read as sites of *potential* because they foster imagination about alternative, future scenarios for the city and its surrounding lagoon.

Similarly, Parkinson (2012) has studied physical sites of democratic protest and has pointed out that these spaces are essential for claim-making and for fostering cross-community encounters between the participants. The selection of these spaces is based on various criteria: a) for their visibility and accessibility; b) because they are sites of power or of symbolic importance; c) because they can host a large number of people (and offer media images that *look like* a large number of people); and finally, d) because these are spaces that

¹⁰ Quinn describes these performative strategies adopted by local inhabitants to avoid tourists as "a form of agency" arguing that "while the action of moving aside to let tourists dominate certain spaces creates an opportunity for their mobility, it simultaneously has the effect of encouraging them to remain confined within these spaces" (2007: 461). Davis and Marvin (2004) also explain these mitigation tactics in their book.

media monitor anyway. Saint Mark's Square fulfills all these requirements, but it is also a space in which a logic of *privatisation* (Parkinson, 2012: 147) has constricted the space for protest. In this sense, Saint Mark's Square is in tune with a common "shift from constructing the public as citizen to the public as consumer" (Parkinson, 2012: 85), although the public here are global tourists and not necessarily the inhabitants of the city. By engaging in civil/democratic disobedience and physically occupying a given space such as Saint Mark's Square, the No Grandi Navi collective "creates temporary fissures in the dominant meanings" of these places (Endres and Senda-Cook, 2011: 257).

Methodology

This article is based on a diversity of sources, including over 700 news articles about mass tourism and protest collected from the database Factiva between January 2014 and December 2017. The media texts were collected using a combination of keywords including 'protest', 'overtourism', 'tourismphobia', 'social movements' and 'right to the city'. The articles were collected for three city-cases in Europe, namely Venice, Barcelona and Amsterdam. The texts were coded with a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). This analysis allowed me to track the media narratives about the social movements denouncing the side effects of global mass tourism, as well as the public debate about the causes of the 'problem' and any potential solutions. Additional media texts were collected in relation to a performance by Banksy near Saint Mark's Square and the No Grandi Navi protests that took place in June 2019, as well as *apropos* the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. Other specialised materials were reviewed, including reports from NGOs and umbrella organisations, as well as press releases and yearly reports from major cruise companies. Photographic data was collected as part of continuous observation and participation in various community meetings and protest acts from 2018 to 2020.

Cruise tourism and its impact on Venice: a global sense of place?

In her article documenting the 100 innovations that transformed tourism, Hjalager includes ocean liners, which were first offered between England and the United States in 1818, detailing that ocean liners became "symbols of technological advances" and later "luxurious floating palaces," though their popularity declined with the development of air transport (2015: 9). Nowadays, cruise ships offer a wide variety of services and amenities for their passengers, going beyond the traditional swimming pools and buffet dinners to include roller- coasters and minigolf courses (Carnival Corporation), robot bartenders and surf simulators (Royal Caribbean) or Cirque du Soleil spectacles or children areas designed by LEGO (MSC Cruises). The *Costa Venezia*¹¹, a cruise ship inspired by Venice with a length of 323 meters and 135.500 tons, offers a virtual-reality gondola tour, a theatre inspired by the famous opera hall *La Fenice* and a restaurant decorated with Canale Grande imagery (Featherstone, 2019), all in a cruise ship with a carrying capacity of 5,200 guests and about 1200 crew members. The ship was purposely designed by the Fincantieri company "to offer the Chinese market the best of Italy," (Fincantieri, 2019b), considering that before the pandemic the Asian market for cruise tourism was expected to grow.

¹¹ It could be argued that this is another form of extracting value from the city (Salerno, 2018) and it links to the observations made by Settis (2014: 60) regarding the emergence of these 'imitations' of Venice.

These 'floating palaces' have an extraordinary diversity for almost each possible market (targeted audiences), thematically ranging from faith-based cruises and LGBT+ cruises to those offered to the elderly and families with children (i.e. Disney cruises). These big ships oftentimes have seductive names such as *Caribbean Princess*, *Harmony of the Seas*, or *Norwegian Spirit*. Vanolo and Cattani (2017) have studied the narratives about gender and mobility in promotional brochures for cruises, pointing out their use of discourses of pleasure and intimacy, of 'happy ageing', professionalism of the workforce and exoticism of both urban and natural destinations. Jaworska (2017) identified the many 'metaphors we travel by', discussing how promotional discourses about travel rely on images of natural precious elements (emerald, jade, bronze), of body experiences (breath, heart-warming, sleepy), and even of religious connotation (paradise, spirit, soul). Although at first sight each cruise seems to provide an 'unique' experience, only four major companies control the global cruise industry: Carnival Corporation & plc, Royal Caribbean Ltd., Norwegian Cruise Line and MSC Cruises (Garcia and Rodríguez, 2018). Behind this pseudo-diversity of narratives and experiences, there is a sort of commonality in the externalities of cruise tourism, and subsequently in the rationality behind the social movements protesting the industry.

Since February 2020, cruise ships have been mentioned in various media outlets due to the pandemic, but cruises have routinely faced other disease outbreaks (including norovirus and measles) that have caused concern for passengers, crews and those who inhabit and work at their ports-of-call. Beyond the epidemiological context, cruises have been involved in a wide range of controversies. The exploitation and precarity of the conditions of cruise workers have been the subject of many news articles (e.g. Deckstein et al, 2019; Garcia and Rodriguez, 2018) and documentaries, including an episode of the political satire show *Patriot Act* entitled 'The Real Cost of Cruises' (2019)¹². Suicides and disappearances have also been reported (Carr, 2020), and although these incidents might seem anecdotal, there are organisations, such as International Cruise Victims, with websites that aggregate the stories of those who have suffered traumatic experiences on cruises, including child drownings. Cruises have been fined for illegal dumping of plastic waste (Nace, 2019), oil and untreated grey waters, and they are a concern due to emissions in relation to the climate emergency.

In June 2019, the European-based Transport and Environment organisation published a report regarding luxury cruise air pollution in Europe, in which the organisation stated that "the brands owned by Carnival Corporation & PLC emitted in 2017 in European seas alone 10 times more disease-causing sulphur oxide than all of Europe's 260+ million passenger vehicles" (2019: 2). In this study, Venice appears in the third position of the top 62 cruise ship-polluted European port cities, with Barcelona and Palma de Mallorca in the first and second positions. In France, the residents of the district Mourepiane in Marseille have testified that the constant presence of cruise ships has seriously impacted their health, denouncing that "cancers started to spread like an epidemic in the neighbourhood five years ago, as cruise ship traffic increased" (Mandard, 2017: online). Concerns about air pollution and the damaging emissions of cruises have prompted spontaneous naked protests in Norway (Haines, 2018) and in Germany, activists have denounced the cruise lines for damaging the climate and the group Smash Cruiseshit (Kreuzfahrtschiffe [k]entern) blocked waterways for about six hours in February 2019, before being arrested by local police (Musaddique and Fleischmann, 2019). In Barcelona, the collective Zeroport has campaigned against any future expansion of both El Prat airport and port of Barcelona (Benavides, 2020).

¹² Currently available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onCT8h8gOig>

In their yearly reports, major cruise companies have addressed some of these 'externalities', proposing both technological solutions and partnerships with other organisations, corporations and local governments in order to reduce their impact on local communities and the planet. Regarding health and safety, Royal Caribbean (2017: 21) has reported coordination with the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention and manufacturers such as ByoPlanet International, with the goal of preventing the spread of norovirus and similar diseases. Regarding the preservation of the oceans and the planet, Royal Caribbean (2017: 10) declared a partnership with World Wildlife Fund (WWF), MSC Cruises (2017: 27-28) reported "continuous progress" in providing their new ships with Exhaust Gas Cleaning Systems (EGCS) and announced improvements in wastewater discharges; while Carnival Corporation (2017: 15) has equipped 43% of its fleet with cold iron capabilities (shore-to-ship power). From blankets of bubbles to reduce water friction to awareness campaigns about sustainability and preservation among passengers (including cruise voluntourism), these companies portray themselves as committed to the goal of sustainability and frequently publicise their efforts to 'give back' to the local communities (for example, MSC Cruises has donated mattresses to the Red Cross and the Salvation Army [2017: 28]). The density of tourist traffic has also been tackled, and companies such as MSC Cruises have engaged in collaboration with the local governments in cities like Dubrovnik (ibid).

In the specific case of Venice, local activists, citizens, scholars and journalists have repeatedly pointed out the many externalities directly and indirectly produced by global cruise tourism. Tattara (2013) has provided a cost-benefit analysis of the cruise industry for Venice, comparing the economic benefits attributable to the industry (among them, the money spent by passengers and cruise crews) to the environmental and social costs (i.e. water pollution, air pollution, etc.). The costs of some of these externalities, for example morphological changes to the Venetian Lagoon and potential damage to monuments, are hard to estimate (Tattara, 2013: 33). In short, global cruise tourism in Venice is associated with air pollution, water pollution, noise, electromagnetic interference, erosion caused by ship wakes (Scarpa, et al, 2019), overcrowding, and even aesthetics conflict resulting from the clash between the modernity of these big ships and the traditional beauty of historic Venice.

The insularity of Venice is extremely relevant for the conflict apropos cruise tourism. The lagoon is a common public space that is part of the local identity (Cavallo, 2016) and the waterways are essential for both public and private life (from waste disposal to hanging out with friends). It could be argued that there is a unspoken rule of experiencing Venice from the water perspective, and that cruise companies exploit this desire of arriving to/departing from Venice by water. However, big cruise ships are often read as a form of transport that is not suited for the city (Figure 2), which was built for other smaller and more sustainable watercrafts (i.e. gondolas, *sandolos* [flat-bottomed rowing boats], small and medium-sized *barcas* [sailing boats] etc.). Indeed, there is a long debate about the impact of other types of vessels, including campaigns for electric *vaporetti* [water buses] (Seraphin et al, 2018) and taxis in an effort to minimise air, water and noise pollution and wave wash. This discussion has included a heated conflict against local kayak tour companies, which ended with an effective segregation of these watercraft to specific areas of the city/lagoon, claiming safety concerns (Fullin, 2019a)¹³. Cavallo (2016: 130) argues that the lagoon is a vital space for local inhabitants, being both a source of sustenance and a privileged space for daily practices. Big cruise ships disrupt this inner logic of the city, while creating concerns about preservation of both material heritage (the city) and its surrounding environment (the lagoon), without

¹³ The safety concerns here are allegedly related to the presence of inexperienced users navigating the many Venetian waterways.

mentioning the potential health effects on the local population (human and non-human bodies).



Figure 2 – The *MSC Musica* liner at the Giudecca Canal during a No Grandi Navi protest (author's photo, 2018).

The Special Law for Venice 171/1973 and the Clini-Passera decree 2012 (that bans the transit of cruise ships over 40,000 tons through the San Marco and Giudecca canals when alternative routes are available) represent two efforts to regulate cruise tourism in Venice, although few concrete changes have been achieved. The search for an alternative route for cruises is not exclusively a matter of local politics (unlike kayaks), but it involves the national government, predominantly the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport, the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism. The complexity of discussions about future routes for cruises will not be addressed here, but it must be said that local activists have identified that some of these new projects will negatively impact the ecosystem of the Venetian Lagoon due to the many excavations needed to open the canals (i.e. Canale dei Petroli or Canale Vittorio Emanuele) for the transit of these cruise ships (Fabbri et al, 2019). Many local activists and scholars emphasise that the most sustainable solution is to keep the cruise ships outside of the Venice lagoon (a form of NIMBY politics), while other groups counter that the populations of Trieste or Fusina (two alternative locations to relocate the cruises to) should be equally protected from the negative impacts of the industry (in what could be defined as a form of 'not-in-anyone's-backyard' (NIABY) activism – Yeo, 2019). UNESCO has closely monitored the situation of both cruise tourism and new tourist developments in Venice, warning that the negative impacts of global mass tourism are becoming a threat for its heritage status (UNESCO, 2019).

Cruise companies are aware of the criticism they face in Venice, and they have collaborated with local authorities to minimise their negative impact. In 2012, Costa Cruises (Carnival Corporation) sponsored *guardiani* (stewards) at Saint Mark's Square in an effort to promote responsible tourism and decorum (ANSA, 2012), although the scheme was later dropped because of local condemnation. Similarly, cruise companies have voluntarily committed to

the preservation of the environment by signing the Blue Flag initiative (2019) with the Comune de Venezia, promising to use less polluting fuel (at or below 0.1% sulphur content) during their period in the Marittima cruise terminal. These cruise companies agreed to voluntary reporting and to external controls by the Port Authority and, in the last version of the collaboration signed in 2019, they also committed to promote the #EnjoyRespectVenezia campaign created by the local government.

In summary, Venice is part of the power-geometry (Massey, 1991) that connects the global cruise tourism industry, with the city being exploited for capital accumulation while being subjected to constant processes of territorialisation, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation (Brenner, 1998; but also, Bertocchi and Visentin, 2019). This means that Venice is neither exclusively global nor local, and that power struggles about the future of the city are required to consider these complex processes of multi-scalar interdependence. Following Hornig (2017), the concept of vertically asymmetric policies is of importance here, considering that many of the benefits associated with cruise tourism in Venice are enjoyed by those at the global and national level, while the many negative externalities of the industry are suffered by those at the regional and local level. Hornig (2017: 339) points out that this “democratic dilemma” might affect both the frequency and strategy of protests, ranging from protest votes to more confrontational and radical tactics (i.e. illegal protests, blockages, etc.). In the following section, the diversity of protests against cruise tourism in Venice is discussed, with a particular focus on the actions of the collective No Grandi Navi.

Protests against cruise tourism in Venice

[Looking at a cruise ship in the distance] *Awful. Downstairs I had to glue the paintings to the wall. They'd fall down otherwise, because of the vibrations. What a bloody screw-up.* Tudy Sammartini in *Das Venedig Prinzip* (2012, 0:43:35)

Social resistance against cruise tourism in Venice cannot be reduced to marches and demonstrations, given that the sum of the countless acts of dissent appear more as a continuum than as isolated events. Any visitor to the city will easily find physical manifestations of this activism against cruise tourism, be it in the form of stickers and posters of previous No Grandi Navi protests, the flags of the movement hanging from windows and balconies, or even anonymous graffiti (Figure 3) and political inscriptions that are found not only in historic Venice but in mainland Mestre and Marghera.

Founded in 2012, at a time when Italy was facing the tragedy of the *Costa Concordia* cruise in which 32 people lost their lives, the No Grandi Navi collective aimed at protecting both the historic city and the surrounding lagoon. As Vianello (2017) indicates, since its origins the movement has been composed of local associations, activists connected to social centres and private citizens of varied social and political backgrounds (among them, Ambiente Venezia and Laboratorio Occupato Morion). Beyond direct actions and lobbying, the No Grandi Navi collective has produced its own reports and studies on the effects of cruise tourism¹⁴, not only proposing solutions but also challenging allegedly ‘deceitful’ data used by local and national authorities. Vianello (2017: 179) has interpreted this activism as “an often neglected aspect of the Lefebvrian concept of the right to the city: the use of (non-

¹⁴ A clear example of this is ‘Libro Bianco’ (2014) a study produced in collaboration of experts such as economist Giuseppe Tattara and architect Gianni Fabbri.

technocratic) scientific knowledge production as a keystone to support emancipatory political projects”.



Figure 3. A stencil artwork against cruise tourism in Zattere (author's photo, 2018).

The No Grandi Navi collective and many unaffiliated inhabitants and associations frequently organise open community meetings to discuss the future of the city and the impact of mass tourism, including events such as book releases, art exhibitions or conferences with local and international scholars. An example of this kind of protest was the exposition 'Maree di Gente' ("Tides of People"), curated by Claudia Cavion and hosted at Sale Docks between April and May 2019 (see Sale Docks, 2019), which aimed at providing a comparison between Barcelona and Venice in terms of the externalities of mass tourism (with explicit references to cruise tourism for both cities). A more permanent activism is a poster campaign designed and financed by We Are Here Venice, which aims at informing both holidaymakers and the local inhabitants about the serious impacts that cruise tourism has on Venice and the planet (see We Are Here Venice, nd).

Instead of focusing exclusively on the issue of cruise tourism, the No Grandi Navi collective engages in activism regarding the future of the city as a whole, including actions against the MOSE project (and the corruption scandals tied to this 'protective barrier') as well as in defence of public housing and against the touristification of the city (i.e. against turnstiles or entry-tickets). In June 2019, No Grandi Navi participated in a protest organised by the group Quartieri in Movimento against new hotel developments in the area of Ca' Marcello near the train station in Mestre (Costa 2019), given that these structures were expected to add more pressure to the historic city (while turning Mestre into a dormitory satellite).

Over the years, No Grand Navi has engaged in a wide diversity of protest acts. The following table presents a timeline of these actions:

| | |
|------|---|
| 2011 | First demonstration against cruise ships |
| 2012 | Demonstration motivated by the capsizing of the <i>Costa Concordia</i> (in which 32 people died off Isola del Giglio) |
| 2012 | Big first demonstration with protest acts at Punta della Dogana and Saint Mark's basin. |
| 2013 | Blockage of access to the cruise ship port |
| 2013 | Action at the MSC stand at the airport |
| 2013 | Swim occupation of the Giudecca canal |
| 2014 | Blitz at the bell tower at Saint Mark's Square |
| 2014 | Protest 'par tera e par mar' (by land and by sea) |
| 2015 | Occupation of bulkheads at the MOSE project (a barrier to protect Venice from <i>acqua alta</i> events) |
| 2015 | Demonstration against cruise ships |
| 2015 | Protest act against the excavation of the canal Vittorio Emanuele |
| 2016 | Protest 'No Grandi Navi, No TAV' |
| 2016 | Human buoys against the cruise ships |
| 2016 | Yes for the protection of Venice |
| 2017 | Referendum: 18,000 against the cruise ships |
| 2017 | Angry animals against the cruise ships (a symbolic boarding) |
| 2017 | Protest act in the frame of European Heritage Days |
| 2018 | Protest against the turnstiles |
| 2018 | This is not Veniceland: March for the future of Venice |
| 2018 | 'Water games' protest at the Giudecca canal |
| 2019 | 10,000 people March to Saint Mark's Square (MSC Opera incident) |
| 2019 | Occupation of the Red Carpet at the Venice Film Festival |
| 2019 | Protest act as a result of the <i>acqua grande</i> flooding |
| 2020 | Protest Venezia 'Fu-Turistica' (a wordplay that means both 'futuristic' and 'was touristic'). |

Table 1 - Protest acts involving the No Grandi Navi movement in Venice (2011-2020) based on data and videos by No Grandi Navi and various news articles.

Among these earlier protests, the unauthorised hanging of a huge banner from the bell tower at Saint Mark's Square in 2014 (Mandurino, 2014) is of particular importance, given that the collective was publicly censored and threatened with legal action (although the case was not pursued). Similar legal action was taken against some members of No Grandi Navi for their *tuffo* (jumping into the water) during a protest in 2016, in which the group was accused of interrupting a public service by blocking the transit of cruises. In this case, the 16 members indicted were acquitted (De Rossi, 2019). Whether in water or in land, the political actions of the No Grandi Navi collective disrupt the spatial rationality needed for endless mass tourism, and there is a clear political motivation to keep them out of a space of power such as Saint Mark's Square.

Saint Mark's Square: A juxtaposition of spaces

In the middle of the coronavirus lockdown, the Italian musician Zucchero released the video *Amore Adesso!*¹⁵, in which he is seen playing the piano and singing in an emptied Saint Mark's Square while aerial shots depict the ghostly beauty of the *piazza* and historic Venice.

¹⁵ The song is an Italian language version of 'No time for love like now', a song by Michael Stipe (former R.E.M. vocalist) and Aaron Dessner (from the band The National), and is currently online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8zgr6meic>

According to the news agency ANSA (2020), the video was a promotion for both Venice and Italy and it was filmed with all the necessary security measures. After the shooting, Mayor Luigi Brugnaro and Zuccherò posed for pictures, given that they are reportedly “close friends” (ANSA, 2020). Similarly, in late August 2020, the Ferretti Group released the short film *Riva in the Movie*¹⁶, a tribute to cinema – and a promotional video for the luxury yacht *Riva* – showing a foggy, emptied Saint Mark's Square at night, while the camera follows the Italian actor Pierfrancesco Favino as he walks toward his yacht and then navigates across Venice. The credits of the film include an explicit reference to Mayor Luigi Brugnaro¹⁷.

In these two recent examples of narratives about Saint Mark's Square, its emptiness seems to capture the attention. To those familiar with the *piazza*, especially in pre-pandemic times, the image of Saint Mark's Square is frequently associated with crowdedness and mass tourism, with musicians playing on the stage of its renowned cafés while children feed pigeons and seagulls alike (although this practice has been banned) and recently married couples pose romantically in their wedding gowns and suits. This idea of overtourism has been included in other cultural products such as the movie *Inferno* (2016, based on Dan Brown's eponymous book), in which Saint Mark's Square is considered the perfect place for releasing a deadly virus that threatens to wipe out half of the world's population. From paintings by Canaletto, selfies in Instagram, references in literary works (from contemporary crime novels to historical treatises such as John Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* [1851-53]), to physical replications like those found in the atrium of cruise ships such as the *Costa Venezia*, the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas and even miniature worlds such as the Miniatur Wunderland in Hamburg, Saint Mark's Square is a place that belongs to the global collective imaginary.

However, what is the physicality of this space named Saint Mark's Square? The *piazza* is the area demarcated by the Old and New Procuracies (north and south boundaries respectively), the Saint Mark's Basilica (east boundary) and the Napoleonic Wing (west boundary). Adjacent to it and as part of the same open space, the square connects to two *piazzette*, the Piazzetta dei Lioncini (north side) and the Piazzetta San Marco (south side), which subsequently connects with the Saint Mark's basin and the Riva degli Schiavoni. In both procuracies buildings and the Napoleonic wing, there are a variety of businesses (i.e. jewellery stores, Murano glass shops, some exclusive boutiques and currency exchange services), some museums (for example, Museo Correr), a public library (Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana) and several outdoor cafés and restaurants. The Saint Mark's campanile, which is a reconstruction finished in 1912 after the original collapsed in 1902 (Davis and Marvin, 2004: 2017), is the tallest structure in Venice.

In spatial terms, there is a complex coexistence of spaces within this physical area. First, from a non-anthropocentric point of view, Saint Mark's Square is a space of *nature*, which floods every now and then (during *acqua alta* events) and is the habitat of many pigeons and seagulls. Second, the square is evidently a space of *leisure and consumption*, which includes

¹⁶ Currently online at: <https://www.riva-yacht.com/it-it/riva-in-the-movie>

¹⁷ Seraphin et al (2018: 376) argued that Venice should be dropped from all promotional materials in an attempt to preserve its cultural dimension. These examples of recent promotion of Venice and its use as a background for advertising could be a result of the many impacts caused by the pandemic (for example, profiting from spaces that are rarely empty). Recently, CBS News reported that an empty Venice is an “irresistible opportunity” for the film industry, with “more than 200 films, commercials and other productions taking place since the start of the pandemic”, which are using “many of these historical locations for free” (Livesay, 2021: online).

symbolic consumption of the history associated with this place and the monetisation of its value (i.e. shopping and consumption of experiences). Third, and easily overlooked, Saint Mark's Square is also a space of *work* for the many waitresses and waiters serving the tables, police officers and soldiers, street vendors, garbage collectors, and recently the so-called 'guardians' who in the context of the campaign #EnjoyRespectVenezia are in charge of relocating people sitting on the Procuracies' steps or verbally reprimanding (given that they don't have the authority to write a fine) those who engage in transgressing against the 'decorum' of the city (Giuffrida, 2018). Additionally, Saint Mark's Square still functions as a *social* space, frequently being the venue of graduations and other popular ceremonies (including some local holidays and religious festivities). The famous Venice Carnival takes place at Saint Mark's Square and recently the *piazza* was used as the venue for a concert organised by Teatro La Fenice, which was planned for the citizens as part of the commemoration of the 1600th anniversary of the foundation of Venice¹⁸. In the *longue durée*, Saint Mark's Square has been used (and produced) for a multiplicity of social, economic and political needs, and it would be unwise to reduce this space to a single functionality (or to declare it an 'apolitical'/'no protest' zone).

Davis and Marvin (2004) have recounted the many uses given to the square, pointing out that pilgrims used to come to the *piazza* to sign up for the galleys and mothers who wanted to marry off their daughters would publicise them there. According to the authors, the square was also used for processions and other festivities, including social customs such as the *passaggiata* (a practice of seeing and being seen). The *piazzetta* San Marcos was indeed a political arena: where legislative deals were made, and votes were sold to the highest bidder (ibid: 61). The proximity of both Saint Mark's Basilica and the Doge's Palace speak of the political and religious power of this spatial configuration, and although public executions and processions no longer take place here, the clues about this past can be read in the many symbols inscribed in the physicality of the surrounding buildings.

Although other squares in Venice are also complex configurations of multiple spatial uses (i.e. space of nature, space of leisure and consumption, space of work, social space, political space, etc.), the monumentality of Saint Mark's Square gives this area an enhanced political power. As Lefebvre remarks:

[t]he element of repression in it and the element of exaltation could scarcely be disentangled; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the repressive element was metamorphosed into exaltation. (1991: 220)

This might suggest that when local students from the collective Li.S.C. protest at Campo Santa Margherita for affordable housing; or when young people associated to the movement Fridays for Future congregate at Campo San Polo for the planet; or when the activists of No Grandi Navi occupy both Zattere and the Giudecca Canal, even if their performance is powerful and manages to capture (global) media attention, they might lack the "symbols of a high-status antiquity" (Parkinson, 2012: 96), the messages of hierarchy and tradition that come with having the monumentality of Saint Mark's Square as a background. It could be argued that in the Square, "the authority of the sacred and the sacred aspect of authority are transferred back and forth, mutually reinforcing one another in the process" (Lefebvre, 1991: 225). After all, significant political events have been staged in the *piazza*. In 1934, Benito Mussolini gave a speech to the Camicie Nere (the Voluntary Militia for National Security) as

¹⁸ See their website for details.

part of a meeting with Adolf Hitler during his first visit to Italy. In 1943, Italians congregated here to celebrate the fall of Mussolini. Later in 1968, a clash between student/protesters boycotting the Venice Biennale and police, a clear example of the past contested political nature of this space, was documented by photographers Ugo Mulas and Gianni Berengo Gardin. Why are protest acts banned within Saint Mark's Square? According to various media stories and some local activists, the motivation for this *divieto* (prohibition) was an invasion by a group of Venetian secessionists known as the Serenissimi, who in 1997 brought a fake tank to the square as part of their claims for independence (Bignotti, 2014). Since then, political demonstrations within Saint Mark's square are not authorised, even when this decision is a political statement in itself.

Nowadays, Saint Mark's Square could be considered one of the most heavily policed areas in Venice. Few behaviours are tolerated here beyond those of consumption and leisure, and these are still restricted within certain limits. The idea of decorum, which is highly valued for Venice as a whole, demands wearing proper clothing (i.e. no swimsuits in public), eating at the designated areas (in the square, this requirement benefits the cafés and restaurants that charge a *coperto* [cover charge] for service in their terraces), no carrying bikes (even by hand), no feeding the birds, etc. Several media stories have reported tourists getting heavy fines for public urination (Mantengoli, 2019) or for sunbathing (Pendolini, 2018 – an event that ironically turned out to be an unauthorised performance by five German students inspired by the motto of the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale: 'Freespace'). In 1989, the Pink Floyd floating concert was a massive event that left over a thousand tons of garbage and brought the city to the point of collapse, even compromising the safety of those who flocked to Saint Mark's Square (Davis and Marvin 2004: 244). Any discussion of ideas of decorum or respect, as well as related debates on securitisation and mass events at Saint Mark's Square, need to address these past 'ordeals'. The question here is: why would people *protesting for* the protection of Venice engage in violence or destructive acts against the city? Why are they considered a 'risk'?

'Venice in oil' by Banksy and Gianni Berengo Gardin

On May 22nd, 2019 the British artist Banksy posted a video on his Instagram (@banksy)¹⁹ depicting an artist selling his work at Riva degli Schiavoni. The artwork consisted of a tableau of oil paintings showing a huge cruise ship against historic Venice, under the title 'Venice in oil'. In the video, a man appearing as Banksy (an actor according to local media) attempts to set-up his portable stall in Saint Mark's Square, but two local police officers ask him for an authorisation and when he is unable to provide one, they invite him to leave the square. The video ends with a real Costa cruise ship navigating in the background, while 'Banksy' walks away along the Riva degli Schiavoni. Although this episode deserves its own analysis (considering Banksy's previous work in Venice²⁰ and his criticism *apropos* the Venice Biennale), it is important to mention that the artist ingeniously managed to protest cruise tourism globally, even after being expelled from Saint Mark's Square (given that the video has been played by more than 5.5 million people). Days later, Mayor Brugnaro invited Banksy to return to the city and create more art, "even if it is a provocation" (Vanzan, 2019: online).

¹⁹ See: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BxxOKYfIVSI/>

²⁰ Banksy also created an artwork of a young migrant child wearing a life jacket and holding a pink flare on a derelict *palazzo* near Campo San Pantalon. Since its first appearance, the piece has attracted both locals and tourists, and local media reported that the value of the property skyrocketed.

But this openness of the local government to 'provocative' anti-cruise art has not been displayed in the past. In 2015, the exhibition 'Mostri a Venezia' ('Monsters in Venice') that was scheduled at the Doge's Palace, created by Italian photographer Gianni Berengo Gardin, was allegedly blocked by Mayor Brugnaro, because it would give a bad image of the city (De Santis, 2015). A documentary by director Serbe-Davis (2019) elucidates this power struggle between local authorities and the artist. First, the exposition was suspended by the Comune di Venezia and a proposal was made to accompany the photographs with "a series of documents in order to somehow counterbalance the potentially negative effect that those images might have on the tourists and the public", as stated by Francesca Barbini (Serbe-Davis, 2019). Berengo Gardin refused this proposal. The association We Are Here Venice responded by organising a flash mob outside the Doge's Palace, as private citizens of Venice, to show "what cruises do in Venice and to our lives," as Jane Da Mosto explained in the film. The exhibition later moved to the showroom Negozio Olivetti, located on Saint Mark's Square. The show was considered a success and it helped to raise awareness about the dangers of cruise tourism, not only in Italy but abroad. After the *MSC Opera* crash, Gardin affirmed that his artwork has been warning about these risks for years (Moschin, 2019).

The *MSC Opera* incident and the right to protest

One of the last scenes of *Das Venedig Prinzip* (2012, 0:75:46) shows the protagonist Tudy Sammartini smoking a cigarette while watching a huge cruise ship leaving Venice: The *MSC Opera*. After a few seconds, she waves goodbye.

On June 2nd 2019 a video circulated in various social networks showing the *MSC Opera* cruise ship losing control and crashing against another vessel, the *River Countess*, docked near the Marittima at the Giudecca Canal. Local and international media quickly shared the footage (credited to Beppe Caccia and Giovanni Pelizzato²¹), in which terrified tourists and crew were seen fleeing the *River Countess*, including images of people falling into the water. The horn of the *MSC Opera*, warning about the imminent collision, adds dramatism to the images. During the day, various other videos emerged showing other angles of the incident, including some filmed from the deck of the cruise ship. Immediately after the crash, an impromptu protest and press conference took place at San Basilio (near the site of the collision), with several members of No Grandi Navi declaring that the incident was another proof of the frailty of Venice and of the lack of political action to find solutions for cruise tourism. As I observed, while locals were protesting below, some tourists on the deck of the *MSC Opera* were enjoying drinks and sunbathing. Later that day, a follow-up protest took place at the Prefecture of Venice (where an emergency meeting was summoned), consisting of a group of concerned citizens demanding answers about the incident.

In the following days, various fictional images of giant cruise ships crashing against Venice were shared in social media. Among them was a scene from a graphic novel (Matteo and Zidrou, 2014), in which a cruise ship collides against the Doge's Palace. Another artwork, shared by the musician Adriano Celentano, depicted a giant cruise liner approaching Venice in a threatening manner while people holding banners are unable to stop it (La Stampa, 2019). While some of these images were considered prophetic because they were created before the real incident, other new images were inspired by the event, such as one artwork

²¹ Online at <https://twitter.com/beppecaccia/status/1135086658792169472>

by local artist Alessandro Enzo (Zoen), in which Saint Mark's Square is protected by a wall of hands that keep a giant cruise ship away. Other artists also created images about cruises threatening Venice, such as several cartoons published in *A Venessia* by local artist Sebastiano Mandruzzato, who preferred to recreate the crash at the Giudecca canal. From these images, it is possible to identify Saint Mark's Square as a referential place that is threatened by both mass tourism and cruise tourism, although these concerns extend to Venice as a whole. While Saint Mark's Square could be used for political purposes in these fictional artworks, the physical square was not readily available for a political demonstration. After the *MSC Opera* crash, local groups requested permission to demonstrate in the *piazza*, which was not granted by the prefecture (Bon and Furlan, 2019). The prefect Vittorio Zappalorto appealed to the organisers in a letter, indicating that protesting was indeed a right, but that Saint Mark's Square is not open for political demonstration since it was "defiled" in 1997 (Zappalorto, 2019: 2). Regardless of this decision, various activists were determined to protest at the square.



Figure 4 – The Ora Basta! protest en route towards Saint Mark's Square (author's photo, 2019).

The mass demonstration, which took place on June 8th 2019 started at Zattere (at the Giudecca canal) and took a route towards Saint Mark's Square (Figure 1), with thousands of participants carrying banners, inflatable pool animals and No Grandi Navi flags (Figure 4). Since several activists publicly expressed their will to engage in civil/democratic disobedience and wanted to occupy the Square, when the march reached the Riva degli Schiavoni, police authorities were lined-up, effectively blocking the access towards both the Piazzetta San Marco and Saint Mark's Square (Figure 5). There, activists stood peacefully, while I saw tourists inside the *piazza* were taking selfies or walked around discovering the architectural beauty of the place, although some tourists were curious about the protest too. Some isolated activists managed to go around the police and entered the *piazza* carrying their flags, but the majority of the protesters remained within the boundaries set by the police. At the end of the day, a group of protesters 'took' the square and posed for a photo (Munaro, 2020b).



Figure 5 – The protest blocked by the police at the Riva degli Schiavoni (author's photo, 2019).

Local newspaper *Il Gazzettino* reported the next day a statement by prefect Zappalorto, in which he stated that those who occupied the square would be identified and denounced, but he acknowledged that the rally was a success for both police forces and protesters, and that the demonstration effectively ended at Riva degli Schiavoni. He nevertheless stated that the demonstration was a “very serious infraction” given that the protesters “broke a pact” and concluded by affirming that for those who broke the rules, “we won’t authorise anything else in Venice” (Fullin, 2019b: online). The debate about the right location for protest acts continued for the following days, intermeshed with the pre-existing long debate about the prospective solutions for the re-routing and transit of big cruise ships within the Venetian Lagoon. In the meanwhile, Saint Mark’s Square returned to its ‘normal functioning’ as a space of leisure and consumption, including a special night during which holographic images were projected on the walls of the Doge’s Palace in a promotion for the upcoming movie *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (partially shot in and featuring Venice) “an event strongly wanted by Mayor Luigi Brugnaro” as the website of the Comune di Venezia declared.

In December 2019, the collective Comitato per la restituzione di Piazza San Marco alla città di Venezia requested a permission to protest in Saint Mark’s Square, which was again rejected by Italian authorities. The group later met informally to share coffee, and this event took place in a flooded Saint Mark’s Square on December 22nd, 2019. With chants that are locally known as *lamentele* (lamentations), the citizens mocked the current state of the city of Venice, exploited by global mass tourism and threatened by the loss of its authenticity and its communal life.

In April 2020, during the coronavirus lockdown, Mayor Luigi Brugnaro participated in a flash mob protest at Saint Mark’s Square with some restaurateurs who have been impacted by

the pandemic (Billato, 2020). The protest was motivated by the need to re-open the city, and Mayor Brugnaro warned that people in Venice were not dying of the virus but were in danger of dying of hunger. On the campanile, the words '#Risorgiamol'Italia (#ResurrectItaly)' were projected.²² Later in May 2020, a new silent protest took place at Saint Mark's Square and the Rialto Bridge, with hundreds of workers (many of them linked to the tourism industry) campaigning for the re-opening of the city.²³ Several activists from various social movements pointed out the irony of these pro-tourism protests happening at Saint Mark's Square, while their political acts are not authorised.

In November 2020, Sony launched its *PlayStation 5* with a light show in an emptied Saint Mark's Square, with the catchphrase 'Play has no limits'. Not unlike political demonstrations, Saint Mark's Square is also 'no play' zone for local children (as stated in the *Nuovo Regolamento di Polizia e Sicurezza Urbana* - Città di Venezia [nd]), supposedly because ball games could disturb and put at risk other people or damage public and private property. In 2018, local media reported that a child was fined 66.80 Euros for riding his scooter near the Piazzetta dei Leoncini, and according to his father the child asked whether "he was going to end up in prison" (Gargioni and Lorenzini, 2018: online). It could be argued that some of these regulations are genuinely aimed at protecting the common heritage of the city, but there is also the possibility that these rules are enforced to prioritise tourists as users/consumers of this space, while sacrificing the needs of the local inhabitants demanding access to the square for their own social or political uses.

Conclusions

This article examined the contested political nature of Saint Mark's Square by offering a short historical context about the *piazza* and tracking media discourses and narratives, commercial uses, protest acts and local policies that contribute to the 'production' of this particular space. The complex power dynamics at play in this physical and symbolic space include not only local actors such as the Comune di Venezia or the collective No Grandi Navi, but also major corporations such as cruise companies (that both directly and indirectly affect this spatial configuration and the city of Venice as a whole).

Saint Mark's Square has been considered a 'no protest zone' since 1997, and various protest acts that have 'illegally' taken place in this space have been censored by local authorities, oftentimes threatening the participants with legal repercussions. Instead of constituting a 'neutral' space that is 'apolitical' (as if such an urban space could exist), the preferred uses given to Saint Mark's Square are those that fill the logic of capital accumulation that benefits both local authorities and tourism stakeholders. From mass events related to movie screenings to cultural events that help to keep Venice on the travel destination map, the local government and tourism stakeholders seem to understand Saint Mark's Square mainly as a space of leisure and consumption. Following this logic, the Square is available for authorised uses that fit more the role of an individual as tourist/consumer than as a rightful citizen/inhabitant, one with the political agency to participate in both opinion- and will-

²² As mentioned above, the No Grandi Navi movement 'illegally' displayed a banner on this campanile in 2014 and faced legal action for this protest (Mandurino, 2014).

²³ See footage of the demonstration online at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgCq3gyuFXg&feature=emb_title

formation and decision-making processes apropos the future of the city and its surrounding lagoon.

The No Grandi Navi collective and related associations and private citizens/inhabitants, with their 'transgressive' acts of civil/democratic disobedience, temporarily claimed ownership of this space while disrupting the narratives that secure the 'normal functioning' of the *piazza* (not only in 2019). In order to secure a lived space for the local inhabitants and following the Lefebvrian notion of the 'right to the city', local authorities are invited to reform their restrictive policies and grant citizens access to this 'political centre' (instead of monopolising it for their own purposes). These acts of civil/democratic disobedience should be interpreted as a valid form of correcting democratic deficits, as the response of a local population that not only is affected by various externalities of the global tourism industry, but that is being physically expelled from their city (or segregated within).

There are other sites in Europe that are highly touristic but that still maintain their political uses, including for example Champs-Élysées in Paris, Brandenburger Tor in Berlin, Trafalgar Square in London and more recently, Museumplein in Amsterdam (emptied of tourists, this space has now been used by those campaigning against coronavirus prevention measures). Additional research is needed to understand how these spaces combine this duality. Recently, global action groups such as Ocean Rebellion have been formed in order to promote the preservation of the oceans and to campaign against global cruise tourism. A cross-cultural comparison of these anti-cruise movements will contribute to our understanding of both the global reach and the commonality of the side effects the cruise industry. Moreover, in the specific case of Venice, and with the context of the coronavirus pandemic, groups that are affected by the temporary withdrawal of cruise tourism and mass tourism have demonstrated demanding the protection of this industry. It is also advisable that future research should focus on pro-cruise tourism movements such as Si Alle Grandi Navi and how these movements relate to the notion of the 'right to the city'.

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