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Profiling ‘Red Bologna’: Between neoliberalisation tendencies and municipal socialist legacy

Abstract

This city profile frames Bologna as an appropriate context in which to elaborate reflections that bring to the same table representatives of two schools of urban scholarship: the advocates of the neoliberalisation thesis, who are predominantly Anglo-American (e.g., Theodore and Brenner, 2002; Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010), and those who criticise the vague and unreflective application of the concept (e.g., Pinson and Morel Journel, 2016; Le Gales, 2016), who are mainly based in continental/Southern Europe. The medium-sized Italian city of “Red Bologna” (Harvey, 2007, p. 12) is chosen because of its municipal socialist legacy, characterised by a traditional communist political subculture and a hybrid form of cooperative, market-based territorial development called the “Emilian Model”. The paper seeks to gauge some of the main contemporary challenges that the city has faced, most of which have been exacerbated by the sudden boost in tourist arrivals and the quick opening up to the visitor economy over the last decade. Ultimately, the paper explores how European third-tier cities can incorporate entrepreneurial orientations and international policy discourses into existing governance structures and modes of development while exhibiting signs of distinct and competing ideologies (Shepherd, 2018).

Keywords: city marketing; neoliberalism; neoliberalisation; urban policy; Emilian model, Bologna; Italy

Bologna: discourse on the neoliberal city and beyond

Bologna is a medium-sized Italian city with almost 400,000 inhabitants that is renowned for its university, purportedly the most ancient in the Western world (de Ridder-Symoens and Rüegg, 2003). Accordingly, one of the three nicknames earned by the city over the centuries is “The Learned” (*la dotta*), which is based on the long presence of scholars, scientists, creative workers, and intellectuals in the daily urban life. Additionally, the nickname “The Fat” (*la grassa*) points to the essential role of food and gastronomy in shaping the city’s

identity as a food capital in terms of both the industry clusters in the area and the perception that national and international audiences have of the city's brand. Finally, the nickname "The Red" (*la rossa*) points to the area's prominent left-wing values and historical primacy of communist and, more recently, social-democratic parties in local and regional elections. Notably, the city is also notorious for being the epicentre of a *sui generis* socioeconomic order known as the *Emilian Model*, in which strong cooperativism and capitalist enterprises co-exist (Greene, 1971; Rinaldi, 2012; Battilani and Zamagni, 2012; Zamagni, 2016).

As the three nicknames suggest, by leveraging its reputation as a tolerant, inclusive and culturally rich city infused with an intriguing food-fuelled *dolce vita*, Bologna has frequently been depicted as a sort of urban "myth" (Scandurra and Giuliani, 2006, p. 87) that displays several characteristics of a "progressive, egalitarian, [and] virtuous" city (Però, 2005, p. 851). Some recurring perspectives stress the presence of "jointly owned and democratically controlled" enterprises (MacPherson, 1996); the existence of an active civil society and the role of vibrant anti-capitalist "social centres" (Mudu, 2004); and the city's reputation as a place where the quality of life is enjoyable, with the Province of Bologna usually ranking high in quality-of-life lists of Italian provinces (e.g., Sole 24 Ore, 2019). In a nutshell, there seems to be widespread agreement that Bologna is a bearer of "*buongoverno*", which is an ideal form of political community aiming to maximise collective wellbeing (see Scandurra and Giuliani, 2006).

At the same time, however, signs of a sharpening decline of the Emilian model have been repeatedly reported in the last two decades (e.g., Rinaldi, 2012), thus highlighting the fissures caused by the crisis in the political communist culture and a concurrent ongoing shift towards free-market dynamics. This city profile comes at a time of rising uncertainty not only because of the current COVID-19 pandemic but also given the drawbacks brought about by the recent and intense "tourism revolution" (Corriere della Sera, 2018), which has exacerbated several urban issues rooted in the decline just mentioned and worsened by the 2008 economic crises. The celebration of the 10th anniversary of the partnership between the local airport and the low-cost carrier Ryanair in 2018 in fact marked the symbolic point of no return in the acknowledgement of an undeniable urban mutation, while the fast growth in the local visitor economy has resulted in an increase of 44% in tourist arrivals between 2014 and 2018 (Città Metropolitana di Bologna, 2019).

The amplified adoption of city marketing, the mounting touristification and the related housing problems caused by short-term rental platforms may explain some of the deterioration of the perceived quality of life among residents, who, between 2012 and 2015

expressed diminished satisfaction with regard to safety and trust in public administration (European Union, 2016). To an urban studies reader, this brief portrait might look like a scholarly *déjà-vu*. Numerous, in fact, are the cities that urban researchers have scrutinised by mobilising what MacLeod, Raco and Ward (2003) call the “hegemony of entrepreneurial neo-liberalism”, which has become a consolidated lens through which to interpret the dramatic market-led transformations that have affected urban governance, economy and institutions in the Post-Fordist era. This perspective is deeply rooted in an Anglo-American urban geography tradition, where the debate on the “neoliberal city” (Hackworth, 2007) has been a dominant trend in post-Wall urban scholarship, resulting in at least 209 articles about neoliberalism published in major journals between 2000 and 2014 (Gentile and Sjöberg, 2020).

The investigation offered in this city profile of Bologna aims to elaborate reflections that bring to the same table advocates of the neoliberalisation thesis and those who have criticised its vague and unreflective application. Critically, Pinson and Morel Journel’s (2016) seminal work proposed an alternative perspective that is rooted in a French, rather than an Anglo-American, school of thought that has begun to challenge the credibility of the neoliberalisation thesis. On the one hand, these France-based urban researchers (e.g., Pinson and Morel Journel, 2016; Le Gales, 2016) recognise the merits of their Anglo-American colleagues’ work, especially in relation to the more constructivist notions of “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodore, 2002) or “variegated neoliberalisation” (Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010), which better capture the contingency and place specificity of global market-led urban transformations. On the other hand, continental European scholars have systematised an organic critique that not only advocates for even more context-based and empirical-based research on this transnational ideology but also stresses the definitional, descriptive, analytical and normative limits that have decreased the capacity of the neoliberalisation ‘*grand theory*’ to capture the detailed dynamics of urban development outside the empirical domains that have thus far been the most commonly studied, the UK and US.

By problematising the neoliberal city discourse within the socioeconomic context of an Italian medium-sized city, the paper seeks to offer relevant lessons to European medium-sized cities that are facing similar challenges. Medium-sized cities, especially those located in peripheral regions, tend to be underrepresented in the extant urban studies literature even though they may face greater struggles than metropolitan areas in finding a place in the contemporary globalised economy. Resonating with scholarly attempts to consider small- and medium-sized cities instead of the usual larger “templates of archetypal urbanism” (Bell and

Jayne, 2009, p. 685), this paper seeks to contribute to the ‘big’ debate about inclusive urban development by exploring how European third-tier cities can incorporate entrepreneurial orientations and international policy discourses into existing modes of development while exhibiting signs of distinct and competing ideologies (see Shepherd, 2018).

This city profile is articulated as follows. The next section sets the stage for the investigation by framing Bologna as the epicentre of the Emilia-Romagna Region. The socio-demographic and economic profile of the city is discussed, followed by a reconstruction of the historical developments that have led to the emergence and consolidation of the Emilian Model (third section). The fourth section selects particular urban policy areas where an erosion of the traditional model is reportedly perceived. Section five illustrates the premises and implications of the “tourism revolution” that has boosted the visitor economy and contributed to urban commodification in the last decade. Some concluding remarks are offered in the conclusion, which summarises the negotiations and compromises entailed by the hybrid form of cooperative, market-based territorial development whereby Bologna and its surroundings navigate the processes of globalisation and Europeanisation today.

Social and economic background

Bologna is the seventh most populous Italian city and is located in the northeast of the country in the Emilia-Romagna region, of which the city is the epicentre. Notably, Bologna can be said to have gained the status of a knowledge city (Carrillo, 2006), a culture city (Griffiths, 2006) and a creative city (Evans, 2009), way before these popular mega-city branding narratives were developed by academic commentators. At the same time, a strong industrial connotation marks not only the historical development of this urban area but also its current global aspirations and socioeconomic landscape. For example, the industrial district branded as the “Motor Valley” clusters together leading companies in the field of motor engineering, such as Ferrari and Ducati, which helps them develop joint employability schemes, collaborate with local universities and pursue new models of territorial innovation; in this way, their industrial assets are able to contribute to regional competitiveness (see Alberti and Giusti, 2012; Bettazzi, 2020).

In terms of economy, Bologna is located within one of the wealthiest Italian regions, with a regional GDP per capita above the national average that contributes more than 9% of the total Italian Gross Domestic Product (ISTAT, 2018). The economic performance of

Emilia-Romagna shows a growth rate of 0.5% for GRP and 2.9% for investment, which are above the national averages (Unioncamere Emilia Romagna, 2019). The region is also a leader in terms of exports, which grew by 4.9% in the first nine months of the year. The region's activity rate is at the top of the regional ranking, and in 2018, the province of Bologna had the highest activity rate of all provinces in Italy. The region is second one in terms of the employment rate, following Trentino-Alto Adige, and the employment rate in Bologna is above 70%. Among the larger Italian cities, Bologna ranked first in 2018 in terms of employment rate.

With a resident population of 392,000 in 2019¹, the city of Bologna hosts 88,000 students (approximately one-fifth of the resident population) enrolled at the most ancient university in the Western world (de Ridder-Symoens and Rüegg, 2003): the Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna founded in 1088 A.D (Figure 1 and <http://www.inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/dati-statistici>). Foreigners constitute 15% of the total resident population: this figure is almost double that of the national average (8.5%) and is between the shares of Milan (19.5) and Rome (13.5). The age structure of the city's population is comparable to the national structure, with less than 30% (25% in Bologna) of the population being under 30. As it is not common for students to change their official residency when enrolling at a university, the university population is not necessarily considered a resident population of the city (ibidem).

[insert Figure 1 about here]

The Bologna area's prosperity originates from, among others, two industrial districts or clusters: the agri-food district and the so-called packaging valley (Bank of Italy, 2018). The region specialises in agricultural production and food processing, which has historically contributed to the development of some important regional industrial activities, including that of packaging. Numerous large companies operate in the province of Bologna, and several products, such as the “potato of Bologna DOP” and the “mortadella di Bologna IGP”, have received quality labels from the European Union. The added value of agriculture and food processing amounted to 7.4 billion euros in 2015, 5.5% of the total regional added value and 4% of the national added value. Between 2000 and 2015, the added value of the sector grew

¹ Throughout the paper, the data and official statistics usually refer to the municipality (*comune*) of Bologna. In some cases, however, the paper refers to the *province* of Bologna. This is an intermediate administrative level that was replaced in 2015 by the metropolitan city (*città metropolitana*), which today includes 55 municipalities.

by 1.1% per year. The packaging valley is composed of 300 firms along the Via Emilia, the main route of the Emilia-Romagna region. The industrial structure of the sector is characterised by the coexistence of a few large global companies and a larger number of small companies. The packaging valley has suffered from the negative effects of the economic crisis to a lesser extent than regional manufacturing as a whole, having benefitted from the favourable performance of exports and from being a stockist for sectors with relatively inelastic demand, such as food and pharmaceuticals. In 2016, the number of employees in this sector exceeded 15,000 units, over 50% of the sector's national total (Menzani, 2012).

In Bologna, this remarkable industrial characterisation does not overshadow culture. On the cultural side, the Alma Mater Studiorum—the second-highest university in Italy after Roma La Sapienza in terms of number of students—has historically been a hub for young people and experts in all fields of knowledge and for scientific events and cultural programmes; e.g., in 1971, the first bachelor's degree in drama, art and music studies (DAMS) in Italy was established. The city has hosted an annual book fair since 1927, and in 2000, Bologna was appointed the European Capital of Culture. Bologna is home to internationally recognised institutions such as the Academy of Fine Arts and the Conservatory of Music, and holds the status of UNESCO Creative City of Music.

The emergence and consolidation of the “Emilian Model”

The Emilia-Romagna region is recognised in Italy as the “land of associations (*associazioni*)” (Ridolfi, 1997 cited in Menzani, 2013) due to its strong bridging of social capital (Schuller, Baron, and Field, 2000; Woolcock 2001) and *civiness* (Dekker, 2009), in a decentralised model of government with intermediate institutions. In this context, the city of Bologna is the hearth of the so-called Emilian Model, based on a combination of strong cooperativism and capitalism (Rinaldi, 2012; Battilani and Zamagni, 2012; Zamagni, 2016). Municipal socialism is a proper label to conceptualise the ‘management orientation’ of local authorities, which mixed together socialist welfare policies and a commitment to sustain industrialisation and SMEs, within a general ideological consensus around the dominant communist party (Rinaldi, 2012).

Since the end of the Second World War, the cooperative movement has contributed to the control of unemployment and the mitigation of worker layoffs during crises. The history of the cooperative movement goes back to pre-unitarian Italy; soon after the fall of the fascist

regime and the end of the war and during the years of the economic boom, work and consumption cooperatives gained influential roles, particularly in the central and northern areas of the country. In the 1970s, when Italy was struggling with the effects of the global economic crisis, the cooperatives emerged as a new fundamental actor in the national industrial scene in both the private and public sectors (Menzani, 2014). Cooperatives in the Emilia-Romagna region offered a new model where the employment protection and specific socio-political are reconciled with an orientation to the globalised market-based competitiveness. Cooperatives in agriculture, consumption and construction often began as medium-sized companies that became significantly larger, with a much sharper entrepreneurial profile and therefore a greater ability to penetrate the markets: in 1963, the League of Cooperatives entered new markets such as the insurance and financial sectors with Unipol, which is currently the most popular insurance group in Italy. In the 1960s, the League created an innovative and winning cooperative model in which efficiency and a more entrepreneurial attitude were at the base of its robust social commitment.

When the socio-economic restructuring of Fordist Western economies started redefining production models at the end of the Sixties, the reputation of Bologna as a combative anti-capitalist place and perhaps even “the showcase city of the Italian Left” (Però, 2005, p. 832) gained strength. A renewed class consciousness by workers to improve working conditions and gain social recognition emerged all over Europe. The term “Years of Lead” (*Anni di piombo*) is used to describe the two decades of social conflict and terrorism that last from 1968 until the late 1980s. Bologna was on the front lines of the terrorist activity: on August 2nd, 1980, a bomb at the central railway station killed 85 people and wounded more than 200. Far-right extremists were condemned for the attack. Similarly, the expression “Hot Autumn” (*Autunno caldo*) describes the worker strikes and protests that unfolded from 1968 to the late 1970s (see Turone, 1981). The Bolognese metalworkers organised numerous strikes and protests demanding safer working environments and more favourable regulations regarding working hours, wages, trade union rights and social security contributions. More than 600 agreements were signed in the most acute years of conflict.

Several previously disregarded factories that had been impacted by the deindustrialisation and delocalisation of production in the 1990s gained new level of prosperity, also thanks to the involvement of the residents and the cultural and creative environment of the city. The project “Bologna Metalmeccanica”², for example, features the

² www.bolognametalmeccanica.it. Bologna Metalmeccanica is a public history project that analyses the transformation of factories in Bologna over the last fifty years.

Ex-Fornace Galotti, which is now the Museum of Industrial Heritage, and the Manifattura Tabacchi, which transformed into a university and cinema centre, as examples of the resulting prosperity. Among the metalworking factories, the former location of Sabiem is now the headquarters of the Opificio Golinelli, a philanthropic foundation active in education, training, research, innovation, business and cultural activities. However, a progressive erosion of the underpinnings of the Emilian Model is presented in the next section.

Fissures in the Emilian Model

This section examines the fissures in the Emilian Model with respect to two main and broad domains of local development and policy intervention. The first subsection reviews the major changes in terms of economic development, while the second subsection explores social policies and inclusion. Both subsections can be contextualised within the context of the major changes affecting the political culture of the region, where the ruling communist party has had to redefine its identity, shifting towards a post-socialist phase (see Però, 2005) and, thus, a social-democratic model. Rinaldi (2012, p. 255) is resolute that “a dominant Communist subculture no longer exist[s]”, as a consequence of the transition from the *Partito Comunista Italiano* to the *Democratic Party of the Left* in 1991. Assuredly, the “erosion of traditional identities” and a secularisation process characterised by a significant drop in political participation and the “normative centrism” of the local party played a role in decreasing the capacity of local authorities to aggregate interests and coordinate social participation (Rinaldi, 2012, p. 256). Given the crucial role of social relationships in explaining the key features of economic systems in general (e.g., Swedberg, 2009) and the Emilian Model in particular, the two following subsections may have some conceptually overlapping areas.

Local economy: coping with growing inequalities

The ‘revolution’ in the traditional political subculture resulted in significant changes in regional leadership, which is worth emphasising, since the Italian Constitution delegates the task of producing economic development policies to regions. The anti-monopoly line of the communist party and its constant support for small firms were gradually replaced by a more market-oriented attitude and attention to the interests of larger companies (Rinaldi, 2012).

Thus, the development agency of the region (ERVET) was reorganised by cutting public funding, while a growing emphasis by the new social-democratic party relied on the “virtues of the market” and private firms. Novel schemes aimed to foster “internationalisation” and promote bidding mechanisms for the provision of financial incentives to individual companies. Furthermore, a reduction in the number of traditional “service centres”, usually catering to the needs of small local firms, ended up privileging the internationalisation of large companies over the protection of SMEs, thus entailing a certain degree of “de-regionalisation”. Additionally, a major institutional shift happened during the implementation of a national devolution law in 1998 (inspired in turn by the same social-democratic party), which required regions to design market-driven industrial policy plans. Some consequences of this new political economic outlook entailed a growth in the average the size of regional firms, an emphasis on research-based innovation and competitiveness, internationalisation and public administration efficiency. This “neoliberal” (Rinaldi, 2012, p. 263) shift resulted in disregarding the needs of SMEs, which still constitute the majority of firms in the Bologna area.

A second noteworthy area where neoliberal tendencies have been noted relates to the cooperative world, which has been affected by a prolonged identity crisis. In fact, while the yearly change in the number of firms in the municipality of Bologna has been positive and more firms have opened than have closed down, the number of cooperatives is shrinking, as entrepreneurs may favour more conventional profit-oriented typologies (Figure 2). Deeper reflections on the evolution of Bologna’s cooperative world are provided by Battilani and Zamagni (2012), who note that in recent decades, several cooperatives have tended to imitate private-owned enterprises’ practices in an attempt to assimilate their routines and strategies to increase their competitiveness. The leftist part of the cooperative movement, so the authors’ argument goes, had to compromise on some values, such as the “mitigation of the equality principle in order to introduce a more meritocratic approach to the remuneration of labour”.

[insert Figure 2 about here]

An “original mix of market-oriented attitude and co-operative values” (Battilani and Zamagni, 2012) seems to characterise the landscape of Bologna, in which the umbrella organisations of cooperative movements such as Legacoop have turned out to be effective service providers in advancing the modernisation of cooperatives in the territory, most of which sought to improve their market efficiency and the professionalization of their

managers, at the same time preserving much of the foundational values of cooperation and the crucial role of workers as bearers of rights and ownership.

Despite these proactive attempts to sustain local development by combining modernisation elements with traditional economic structures and values, a look at recent income distribution trends reveals that Bologna has not been immune to the increasing inequalities sharpened by the 2008 crisis. In fact, comparing data on income distribution in 2007 and 2015, Ardeni and Leone (2017) documented a worsened distribution of income that advantaged the richest groups of taxpayers in Bologna. Even though the performance of the Bologna area in general looks better than the Italian figures over the same time span, increased poverty was reported among the local population between 2005 and 2012 (ibidem). Policies for tackling poverty have been mobilised by both metropolitan and regional authorities. These policies, in combination with the schemes and resources provided by the national government (“Support for active inclusion”), appear to reproduce a popular (neoliberal?) ‘activation policy’ discourse that tends to emphasise the responsibility of individuals in the process of improving their employability and capacity to produce income. However, more notable efforts to offer redistribution mechanisms are in place in Bologna than in other regions of Italy, signalling the still remarkable role of public welfare structures despite the augmented market orientation, which the next subsection explores in regard to social policies.

Social policies, inclusiveness and participation

The level and quality of social services available to Bologna’s inhabitants are definitely above the national average thanks to a number of factors, such as the commitment of local and regional authorities, the financial resources at disposal and the cultural values related to civicness (Dekker, 2009) that lies at the Emilian model’s roots (e.g. Saruis, 2010; Maestripieri, 2013). Despite the increasing externalisation whereby local authorities have tended to outsource the delivery of social services to co-operatives and private firms, thus in line with general trends in European welfare systems (see Saruis, 2018), both the municipal and the regional government have continued to manage social policies in a manner that cannot be described simply as a “dismantling of welfare programmes” (Theodore and Brenner, 2002, p. 350). Even though the mechanism is not effectively implemented for every type of social service, the regional government, for example, is entitled to set standards for the accreditation of private actors, which are required to guarantee a minimum service quality; due to the

municipality's remarkable investments in childcare provision, women participate in the labour market is far better than in any other Italian regions (see Maestripieri, 2013).

Clearly, the Bologna area has not been immune to the growing importance of ideas of cost-efficiency suggested by the New Public Management principles (see Barberis et al., 2018; Giovanardi et al., 2018), which have trickled down into the management practices of local authorities³. A reduction in financial resources at a national level has contributed, for example, to the shrinking of local investments in elderly care (ibidem). Other commentators explored how the local welfare system in Bologna navigated the introduction of a new information system, aimed at widening access to care services by matching supply with demand (Giullari and Bertoni, 2016). Crucial for the investigation of this city profile, the authors' reflection discuss the risks posed by information systems that would tend to standardise and "pre-structure the encounter of social [services] demand and supply" (p. 495). However, they also stress how the project sought to cushion this issue by encouraging the participation of social workers in specific training sessions, which allowed to give voice to (and gather the feedback of) street-level workers, who provide daily care and assistance to citizens/customers.

Passing on to consider an additional facet of the dialectic between the logic of the market and the logic of social cohesion, the geographic expression of social issues should be explored with respect to growing inequalities in Bologna's urban development. As noted by Buzar, Hall and Ogden (2007), it would be inappropriate to refer to the regeneration processes of the last two decades with the label of gentrification, "because they do not involve major housing renovation and are spread throughout the inner city in a diffused and fragmented manner" (p. 64). In "*gentrification all'Italiana*", Bazzoli (2018) reminds us that in Bologna "gentrification's *magnitudo* appears to be quite contained, without the dramatic replacements of population that are reported in Anglo-Saxon countries, thanks to the presence of a remarkable share of house owners in urban contexts, even among lower-income groups" (p. 111). However, the rapid increase in the number of international immigrants and the high concentration of university students in some urban districts have characterised what Buzar et al. (2007) call a complete reshaping of the population geography in the city centre, which is now dominated by a "postmodern" (p. 80) non-traditional household structure. The

³ The relationship between the local and the national dimension of welfare system in Italy should be acknowledged to appreciate the specificities of the Emilian tradition. Among others, we should note the absence of an organic national framework, an unbalanced resource distribution and the devolution of responsibilities to other actors, such as families and the Third Sector in absence of appropriate financial support (see Kazepov, 2011).

neighbourhoods with the highest foreign population, both European and extra-European, are the norther ones, in particular Navile and San Vitale, which are at short distance from the historical city centre (Figure 3).

[insert Figure 3 about here]

Furthermore, this peculiar re-urbanisation, where previously industrial neighbourhoods such as La Bolognina tend to become the favourite shelters for growing flows of foreigners, has presented policy makers with significant issues in terms of integration. If local policy makers have traditionally understood migrants as a demographic and socioeconomic resource (Scuzzarello, 2015) and have helped project an image of a “diverse city” (see Hassen and Giovanardi, 2018), the more mundane and practical aspects of this council’s ‘diversity management’ have been criticised. For example, Bergamaschi et al. (2014) document the exclusionary urban policies targeting homeless people in Bologna. In a similar vein, Scandurra (2018, p. 38) expresses a pessimistic evaluation of the municipality’s attitude towards the rapidly evolving peripheral districts, arguing that the local administration does not have enough knowledge of the “citizenship practices” performed by the new foreign city dwellers.

Bianchi’s (2018) analysis of urban commons in Bologna provides additional food for thought in situating the discussion on the “right to the city” (Masuda and Bookman, 2018) within a critical assessment of civil society’s ability to take part in local decision making. Bianchi reconstructs the historical presence of multiple “participatory claims” (Bianchi, 2018, p. 293) in Bologna, of which public discussions on the urban commons are the most recent development. Bianchi spelled out two different concepts of the commons, showing the ambivalence of urban discourses that seem to challenge the equilibrium and status quo behind the neoliberal city. Specifically, she argues that “the recently approved ‘Regulation between Citizens and the City for the Care and Regeneration of the Urban Commons’ *post-politicizes* the meaning of the concept of Commons with the aim of building consensus among active citizens on the most visible aspect of the urban question” (p. 302, emphasis added). This has the drawback of “de-fragment[ing] and ‘de-multiply[ing]’ the more antagonistic participatory claims which Bologna still has plenty of, excluding them from political life” (ibidem).

Bianchi’s allegation of the diminished ability of local authorities to listen to the needs of urban communities is however mitigated by encouraging signs. In her conclusion, she argues that “it does not seem that the post-politicized meaning of the Commons is

overshadowing the politicized meaning, suturing the social space” (2018, p. 302) as long as the politicised meaning of the commons is being reclaimed and the neoliberal attempt to limit civic participation is denounced through the mobilisation of what Lindberg, Fitchett and Martin (2019) would call an “activist regime”.

5. The “tourism revolution” and commodification of urban experience

The evolving tourism context in the 2010s

Traditionally, tourist flows in Bologna have been mainly determined by four drivers (Comune di Bologna, 2014b), two of which appear to be strictly business-related: first, the dense local manufacturing system that mobilises intense business travelling; second, the huge exhibition centre (“*Fiera*”); third, the several reputable healthcare facilities generating a sheer number of national medical tourists (see Italian Ministry of Health, 2020); and fourth, the university. These were seen as crucial generators of overnight stays, but also as factors that tourism policy making and destination marketing can influence only to a little extent. Crucial to make sense of the change in perceptions among local tourism entrepreneurs is the city’s accommodation capacity, which grew significantly despite a consistently flat demand. One result of this supply excess was the decrease in average sales prices, which did not favour an increase in demand but instead caused a regular decline in the revenues of Bolognese accommodation facilities between 2002 and 2008. Notably, hospitality managers became more inclined to new forms of collaboration and synergy (Comune di Bologna, 2014b).

Tourism flows of national and foreign visitors to the city had been on a growing trend until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 (Figure 4). The business-related nature of visits is confirmed by two indicators: first, the average length of stay is stable at an average value of two days and indeed most business-related visits are scheduled over a few working days or the weekend; second, monthly data show that August, when most firms and employees schedule their holiday break, is the month with the lowest value of arrivals throughout the whole year.

[insert Figure 4 about here]

The increase is apparent both for hotels and other structures although the latter is the typology showing the more prominent dynamics. In the last twenty years, the number of available beds in Bologna almost doubled and rooms had a 60% increase. In the same decades, the contribution of accommodations other than hotels increased from being less than 10% in 1999 to almost 35% for both indicators in 2018.

[insert Figures 6 and 7 about here]

In addition to the change in tourism entrepreneurs' perspective, some fortunate infrastructural changes should be mentioned, as they started to influence tourism demand towards the end of the decade. In particular, the increasing activity of low-cost airlines at the local Marconi Airport and the opening of the new high-speed train station in Bologna provided a sudden and substantial "exogenous" boost in demand for the city's tourist attractions despite the continued international economic reverberations of the global crisis. These favourable factors in the city marketing environment had their roots in the previous decade, when the city found itself "at the centre of several large-scale transport improvements promoted by the national government between the end of the 1990s and the 2000s" (Carbonaro and Pancotti, 2019, p. 12), such as "the Milan-Bologna high-speed train line, which cut journey times between the two cities from 105 to 60 minutes. It was within this favourable context that local policy makers decided to deploy an intentional strategy to enhance the international profile of the city and extend its 'product portfolio' by strengthening its capacity to cater to an augmented inflow of visitors.

Raising the city profile through marketing and branding

Both international relations and the construction of a favourable competitive image were at the top of the local agenda in the early 2010s (Comune di Bologna, 2014a). Even though a certain degree of participation has been granted to local communities, the explicit use of the city branding discourse indicates an evident engagement with one of the more contradictory neoliberal urban management tools and thus warrants a specific illustration. The programme "Economy and Promotion of the City" lies at the foundation of the outward-oriented plan for

Bologna witnessed in the last 5 years, and this can be identified in three domains of intervention.

The first domain is that of “Bologna International” (ibid., p. 71), which prescribes a number of actions devoted to improving the international relations of the city and furthering Bologna’s capacity to engage in significant European projects. For example, participation in reputable urban networks, such as Eurocities, Eccar and Unesco Creative Cities (p. 73), was given prominence in 2014. The second domain of intervention echoes the fashionable theme of smart cities: the development of a “digital agenda” for Bologna that enthusiastically underlines “the progressive qualities of technological innovation” (Odendaal, 2016, p. 615). It is through the third domain of “urban marketing” (p. 76) that the strategic plan articulates the main tenets of the city’s new vision and its global aspirations. In fact, urban marketing is considered a strategic reference to a tourism innovation project (“*Innovazione delle forme di offerta turistica*”, p. 76) and is the preferred platform for facilitating the integration of all of the urban promotion actions planned for the future. The two main cornerstones of this strategic avenue were the creation of a city branding project and a destination management organisation (DMO).

The Bologna City Brand Project was created by the municipality of Bologna in 2012-2014 to increase the effectiveness of the city’s territorial marketing policies by determining how the city wanted to position itself. This involved a research-based investigation of the most appropriate strategies for conveying that position to the local, national, and international audiences⁴ (Grandi, 2015). Not surprisingly, Bologna is associated with its *portici*, the university and the Towers of Bologna. The city is defined as welcoming and open minded, a city that innovates, and a city of culture, creativity, and good food, confirming the reputation captured in the three nicknames presented in the introduction. To define a logo, an alphabet consisting of geometric signs that produce a figure based on any word typed into the platform at <http://ebologna.it/> was created (see Figure 7). The communication strategy was determined by the local Destination Management Organisation “Bologna Welcome”.

In line with tourism management suggestions on the effectiveness of coordinating tourism stakeholders (Bellini & Pasquinelli, 2017), “Bologna Welcome” is intended to be an interface between the public and the private. The ultimate goal of the new institution is to support the coordination of tourism activities in the area, thus performing the tasks of what is

⁴ Details on the research process and additional materials are available at <http://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/progetto/bolognacitybranding>.

generally known as a destination management organisation, with a particular focus on MICE tourism (meeting, incentives, conferences & events).

A supplementary driver of international reputation within the “urban marketing” domain of intervention emphasises the role of the global brand UNESCO. First, strategic planners intended to further capitalise on Bologna’s membership in the UCCN (UNESCO Creative City Network) Cities of Music, which has been a member of since 2006. Second, the proposal to finalise the application to include the *portici* on the list of UNESCO protected heritage sites gained momentum. Only in 2020 did Italy’s national UNESCO committee finally approve the nomination, with final approval from UNESCO expected in 2021 (Levine, 2020).

[Insert Figure 7 about here]

Urban commodification through food

A crucial area of conflict in the increasingly overwhelmed Bologna is a significant alleged commodification of the gastronomic experience, both in the city centre and in other districts. Noteworthy in this respect is a 140 million euro retail project that received the support of the municipality (Vesentini, 2017). The project is called FICO, nicknamed “the Disneyland of Food” (Mastandrea, 2017), which remarks the nexus between the city’s capitalist orientation and its cooperative culture, given the pivotal role of cooperatives in the management of the organisation. The project is contested because, for some commentators, its “commercial soul prevailed over the educational one” (Vesentini, 2017), with a great deal of “heavily branded restaurants and bars,” thus evidencing “the mass consumer culture behind the project,” as *The Guardian* framed it (Seymour, 2017). For these reasons, “the world’s largest agri-food park” appears to be “a project that stands in direct contrast to the traditional allure of Italian gastronomy”. In this view, FICO can be appreciated as a (destination) marketing-fuelled fetishisation of food that goes against social sustainability and facilitates the commodification of the local food culture. Along the same lines, Bazzoli’s critique underscores the damaging impact that commercial activity in Bologna (2015), including gastronomy and *loisir* (2018), has on urban centres transformation: “Waves of tourists up to consume the symbolic aura of inner cities, or night transhumanances for the ritual of *aperitivo* ... are markers of processes that are impacting the essence of cities” (2018, p. 111). As summarised by Adema (2006) in

her study on festive foodscapes, “through the re-contextualization of place branding, a food can become suitable for fetishization, iconization, and festivalization” (p. vii).

Discourses on sustainable tourism

The relevance of sustainability has been given considerable importance in public discourses on tourism development, in line with the traditional civic ethos of Bologna as a community-oriented and inclusive place. It is not a coincidence that a yearly festival of responsible tourism was launched in 2009 by a local non-profit organisation in Bologna, ITACA; so the festival is named, represented Italy in the UNWTO awards, obtaining the third place in the area dedicated to “Innovation in Non-Governmental Organizations” (UNWTO, 2017). More crucially, the “goals for sustainable growth” mentioned in the guidelines for territorial marketing (Comune di Bologna, 2014b, p. 11) express some awareness of the damaging consequences of overtourism and the need to prevent problems of capacity. However, the document is clearly growth oriented and emphasises the opportunity to increase the tourism industry’s workforce, tourist expenditures, the overall quality of tourist experiences and, ultimately, the value that the tourism industry can provide to the city. More manifest claims of sustainability underpin the 2018 Metropolitan Strategic Plan, which overtly embraces environmental, economic and social sustainability principles as part of its foundation. Here, the “extraordinary growth” of tourism is considered “an opportunity...that should work out the sufferings and the inequalities” of the territory (Città Metropolitana di Bologna, 2018, p. 12). Here, the sustainable tourism discourse is entangled with the popular “authenticity” and “bottom-up development” discourses, with the former being tasked with socioeconomic development and the “redistribution of flows” within the metropolitan area.

The exacerbation of housing problems is proof that the actions taken by local authorities have not been entirely adequate for confronting the unrestrained tourism revolution and its impact on local residents. Attention to this issue was brought about by the emergence of oppositional movements to the intensifying inequalities caused by the increasing number of accommodation facilities being transformed into temporary accommodations for tourists and widely advertised by OTAs (online travel agencies). With the number of Airbnb flats almost doubling between 2017 (3,000) and 2018 and reaching a peak of 5,514 (Gainsforth, 2019), “counter-branding” (Maiello and Pasquinelli, 2015) was initiated by local inhabitants and student committees under hashtag #stopAirBnb. In particular, the committee “Pensare

Urbano” (<http://www.pensareurbano.it>), active since 2018, challenged the local authorities’ propensity to privilege temporary consumers over long-term students, who started finding it difficult to secure a flat during their studies. A public investigation launched by the municipality in 2019, followed by a public announcement by the mayor about the intention to stop the registration of new Airbnb hosts in the city centre starting in spring 2020 (Giusberti, 2019), can be considered preliminary steps in the attempt to rebalance the numeric relationship between residents and tourists near the more iconic public venues, while local committees continue to fight for more restrictive measures (BolognaToday, 2020).

We recently witnessed more resolute public claims by the councilman for urban economy and promotion, who argued against excess numbers of tourists, warning that “we should avoid overtourism transforming us as it did with Florence and Venice” (Corriere della Sera, 2018). These bottom-up claims celebrate socially sustainable tourism and the need to rebalance the city marketing mix; however, recurrent critical arguments suggest that policy-as-discourse (i.e. sustainability claims) does not seem completely aligned with the policy-as-practice (i.e. substantial interventions implementing those claims), thus lending some support to Scandurra and Giuliani’s (2006, p. 87) criticism about the progressively “limited power” and decreasing authoritative character of Bologna’s municipal authorities. A more effective sustainable tourism discourse would contribute to reducing, and not sharpening, the fissures in the Emilian Model.

Concluding remarks

This city profile has scrutinised Bologna as a vibrant urban laboratory of urban development and policies where it is possible to observe competing and distinct ideologies coming together in hybrid and context-specific forms (Sheperd, 2018). In a sense, the dynamics discussed in the previous sections appear to echo, to a certain extent, the “gradual decomposition of the Fordist/industrial model of development, alongside the slow erosion of key institutions enshrined in the welfare state and a major crisis in the legitimacy of modernist-inspired urban planning” (MacLeod, Raco & Ward, 2003, p. 1655). In this view, the intense touristification, city centre commodification and overall exacerbation of social inequalities recall features of the neoliberalising city script outlined by Theodore and Brenner (2002), lending some support to the hypothesis of a progressive erosion of the Emilian Model under global neoliberal pressures. The identity crisis of the national and local communist apparatus during its post-

socialist turn (Però, 2005) towards the creation of a liberal social-democratic party explains this ideological shift. At the same time, Bologna has often been celebrated as a city capable of “enabl[ing] high-profile moments of resistance against ideologically aggrandising neo-liberal endeavours” (MacLeod et al., 2003 p. 1657). However, both this idealised representation and the argument that all of the structures and values underpinning the Emilian Model have been wiped away by neoliberalisation appear to be over-simplifications.

Using a more nuanced perspective in line with that of Pinson and Morel Journel (2016), this city profile has sought to problematise the role of neoliberalisation as a “default explanation” (Gentile and Sjöberg, 2020, p. 159) to illuminate how a resourceful third-tier city can navigate globalisation tendencies. Recent economic and social development trends, in fact, still exhibit some ideological characterisations that may be related to the legacy of the municipal socialism that characterised the communist ideology at the roots of the Emilian Model. Confidently, we cannot deny the manifestations of general post-Wall urban policy tendencies, such as the increased role of market orientation visible in the externalisation of social services, the cost-reduction and service efficiency discourse, the activation policies that shift responsibilities to the individual level and entrepreneurial, as well as brand-driven urban promotion. These manifestations clearly mirror the adjustments and the disruption that occurred in established modes of local and regional development and governance. However, these disrupting forces have not completely erased the relevance of public local authorities and their prevailing “guided” (Messina, 2012) approach to local development, where extended social consultation and a strong civic tradition still constitute an important mechanism that may mediate the impact of reportedly neoliberal urban characterisations, making Bologna a noteworthy example of a local welfare-oriented economy.

Whether the still-operating inclusive and integrating character of the “guided development” (see Messina, 2012) approach can be seen as a sign of resilience against neoliberalisation or, rather, as a practical way to implement effective managed economies remains an open question. More relevant to determine would be the approach’s ultimate ability to lessen inequalities, facilitate more sustainable forms of tourist development and, hopefully, foster a more inclusive urban society. In any case, further empirical investigations into the fascinating contradictions characterising urban development in Bologna might be a fertile terrain for more grounded investigations into notions such as “actually existing neoliberalism” or “variegated neoliberalisation”, which should also take into account alternative and competing ideological characterisations. Ultimately, this would be a fruitful occasion to stimulate a research agenda cutting across the different academic schools of

thought and, perhaps, to continue exploring the role of political ideologies in urban policy making and planning (see Sheperd, 2018) through comparative studies that go beyond the preferred settings of Anglo-American researchers to embrace other European and non-Western contexts (Pinson and Journal, 2017).

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