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Place branding as urban policy: the (im)political place branding

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ABSTRACT

The present paper argues for more conceptually-laden research on the constitution of place branding as a hybrid form of urban policy. By both drawing from empirical examples and problematizing the extensive research on place branding, this paper offers the view of place branding as an impolitical form of urban policy that emerges as a biopolitical apparatus in an ecology of complex political practices which can materialize both negatively and positively. Ultimately, this paper outlines a novel alternative approach for conducting research and analyse the politics of place branding. Such an approach has the potential to more clearly analyse and theorize the political dimensions of place branding.

1. Introduction

The widespread connection between practices of branding on one hand and regionalization on the other as pointed out by [Tait and Jensen \(2007\)](#) is not only the product of a more entrepreneurial attitude of cities and regions ([Harvey, 2012, 1989a, 1989b](#)), but it can also be seen as the end result of a type of urban policy (see [Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Isin, 1998](#)) emerging as a hybrid materialization representing the process of creating new spatial settings ([Berg, Linde-Laursen, & Löfgren, 2000; Hospers, 2006, 2008; Lucarelli & Hallin, 2015; Metzger, 2013](#)). (See [Fig. 1](#).)

The intersection of branding and regionalization, especially in regard to spatiality, has recently been a topic of increased attention (see [Zenker & Jacobsen, 2015](#)). Such research is helpful in pointing out various categorizations and reflections on the way in which different processes of nonstandard regionalization create new spatial layouts that emerge as different forms of place brands (see [Boisen, 2015; Boisen, Terlouw, & van Gorp, 2011; Witte & Braun, 2015](#)) as well as those which are founded on networks of both market-driven and political visions of territorial cooperative strategies (see [Pasquinelli, 2015](#)). This intersection, as this paper will further argue, is being shaped as urban policy which is the result of the co-evolution of branding and regionalization discourse (i.e. in both theory and practices); this does not merely emerge as a purely determinist modern capitalist, market-led policy ([Leys, 2003](#)), but rather as a processual hybrid policy ([Sheller & Urry, 2003](#)) in which for example the public and the private, economics and politics, and the market and the polis are blurred and co-emerge (i.e. as a process) in a relational and interactive manner (see [Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015](#)).

The emergence of place branding as specific form of urban policy

and its hybrid nature is the main issue the present paper attempts to unpack. In so doing, the present paper first offers an empirical illustration of the co-evolution of branding and regionalization discourse by using the example of Greater Stockholm. Secondly, by moving from practices to theory, the present paper briefly unpacks and critically assesses the theoretical condition in which place branding is considered to be a form of urban policy. Third, the paper moves on towards offering an understanding of urban policy which could be endorsed in order to more clearly analyse and theorize the political dimension of place branding. All this has the final aim to complement previous research with a more complex view on the type of politics around which place branding is constructed (e.g. [Anttiroiko, 2014; Lucarelli & Giovanardi, 2014; Ooi, 2008; Vanolo, 2014, 2017](#)).

2. Place branding as hybrid materialization of urban policy

In the 1980s, the branding of Greater Stockholm became a policy issue. Such a development, similar to those in other European cities, is characterized by peculiar mix of regionalization and branding ([Boisen, 2015](#)), in which the development of branding evolved in tandem with practices and discourses on regionalization and more specifically regional development. Additional to a mixture of place branding regionalization as shown in the case of Copenhagen ([Boisen, 2015](#)) or in Greater Stockholm as pointed out by [Metzger \(2013\)](#) and [Ågren \(2011\)](#), one can easily see the entangling of those two discourses – branding and regional development – which feed each other into the creation of place branding as form of urban policy. Whereas Greater Stockholm along the years has been promoted in different manners with a more specific focus on branding, starting with the campaign at the end of the 1980s in which Stockholm and its surroundings were marketed as “Beauty on

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Das Kapital of Scandinavia



Stockholm

Das Kapital of Scandinavia

"Här har ni staden med flest multinationella företag, den största aktiebörsen, bredaste motorvägarna, flest lyxyachter, de flottaste hotellen, största gallerierna och en egen flygplats. Något av det finaste tillvaron har att erbjuda."

Vad är Das Kapital of Scandinavia?

Vi har inlett kampanjen "Stockholm Das Kapital of Scandinavia" för att sticka hål på alliansen mellan stockholm stad och näringslivet som samlats under den svulstiga parollen "Stockholm the Capital of Scandinavia". Med vår kampanj vill vi sätta fokus på stadspolitikerna och vad den egentligen borde handla om. Vi slåss för att bevara allmänningarna, mot monokulturen och för en fri stad! Hjälp oss att ta politiken tillbaka till gatan, parken, torget och ditt kvarter för det är där och inte på aktiebörsen eller i slutna rum på stadsbyggnadskontoret de hör hemma!

Kampanjen är fri för alla att använda. Gör motstånd! Ta den tillbaka!

Vill du veta mer om bakgrunden och tankegångarna kring lanseringen av kampanjen läs vår text [Welcome to Das Kapital of Scandinavia](#).

Water", a similar phenomenon emerged during this time in the regional area around Stockholm, yet with different aspirations. The Mälardalsgruppen, a small group of politicians representing cross-block party affiliations, formed a regional assembly in order to discuss new regional policies based on a "common political will". This resulted in the establishment of a functional region, the Mälarenregion, a region endowed with a vision and a mission (see Metzger, 2013). What is apparently two distinct trajectories (see Tait & Jensen, 2007) can instead be seen through a more in-depth analysis (see Lucarelli & Hallin, 2015) as simultaneously constitutive and constituent of place branding policy which is materializing in different spatio-temporal forms. By analysing the archival research conducted in several empirical studies (Ågren, 2011; Lucarelli & Hallin, 2015; Metzger, 2013) it can be recognized that several pamphlets, promotional materials and also policy documents retrieved from the archive of the Stockholm-Mälaren region are not only representing the "vision" for the Mälarenregion as framed by the report drafted for the yearly meeting of 2010, but inside those materials one can also retrace similar visual and textual elements that are found, five years later, in pamphlets, promotional materials and policy documents referring to the new brand for the city of Stockholm: "Stockholm the Capital of Scandinavia".

As shown by Lucarelli and Hallin (2015), by comparing the official and promotional documents representing the Mälarenregion vision with the branding activities for "Stockholm the Capital of Scandinavia", one can observe a series of significant connections. First, the new brand "Stockholm the Capital of Scandinavia" replaces the prior brand "Beauty on Water" as formal branding for both the Mälarenregion and Greater Stockholm. Also, second, by analysing the visual and textual elements composing the brand "offering" as presented in the "Stockholm the Capital of Scandinavia" brand-book issued in 2005, one can moreover observe that there is a substantial change in the primacy and order of textual elements. To specify, the prior brand for the city of Stockholm "Beauty on Water" presented only a secondary element composing the three main pillars in the image representing the Mälarenregion vision as shown in the documents from 2000. However, in the images of the 2005 brand-book, the brand elements representing the new brand "Stockholm the Capital of Scandinavia" (i.e. Central, Business, Culture) became the main textual element. This shifting in

Fig. 1. Image retrieved from the webpage alattmsthl.com.

order, in addition to a regrouping of older textual elements such as "Nobel", "IT", and "Openness" under different headings in a subsequently subordinate order, signals thusly that, without embarking in a full semiotic analysis, the two intertwined discourses – one on regionalization and one on branding – are emerging as constituting and constituent of each other in the case of Greater Stockholm. This in turn creates a new spatial layout (i.e. brand region) which is not recognized legally by the legislator, yet it functions and is structured as a new geographical entity (Metzger, 2013). What is peculiar here, especially regarding the way in which branding in different forms of regionalization create different branding process (Boisen, 2015; Witte & Braun, 2015), is that contrary to local network branding (Pasquinelli, 2015) the new spatial entity is created as a result of other areas that have aligned themselves with the brand "Stockholm the Capital of Scandinavia". Here the co-development of two discourses (i.e. regional development and branding) is emerging in a way that one discourse takes temporal and spatial primacy over the other in a rotational manner. This dialogical relationship, I argue here, allows a recognition of how so-called "place branding" could not only be understood as a managerial philosophy and practice applied to places, but also as the hybrid expression of a peculiar form of urban policy which is affecting spatial layout and settings.

3. Place branding as urban policy: when practice meets theory

The aforementioned example has helped to solidify in more concrete terms the way place branding indeed expresses a peculiar form of urban policy. This present section briefly unpacks and critically assesses the theoretical condition in which place branding is considered to be urban policy. The main argument here is that the literature on place branding, not only the empirical materials, has also helped to further recognize, if not consolidate, a regime of knowledge production in which place branding is presented as a peculiar type of urban policy. More precisely what emerges from a critical assessment of theory is an understanding of place branding as a political instrument for urban policy which is characterized by a specific typology of "politics", in which its essence is emerging as form of hybrid policy. (See also the next section for a more detailed description.)

But first, in order to show how the literature and empirical work help to conjointly create a regime of knowledge production, as mentioned in the previous section, I will present this relationship again in the case of Greater Stockholm. This time, however, it is used as a theoretical illustration. As both academically and empirically led research on the branding of Stockholm have contributed to framing (see Dobers & Hallin, 2009; Lucarelli & Hallin, 2015; Stubbs, 2016; Stubbs & Warnaby, 2015) the understanding of the process, it is characterized by many forms of opposition and challenges. This indeed is not peculiar only to Stockholm; other research, for example, on Amsterdam (e.g. Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2007; Neuts, Devos, & Dirckx, 2014) and Berlin (see Colomb, 2012; Colomb, Kalandides, & Ashworth, 2010) has shown similar patterns. However, if one focuses on Stockholm and unpacks the assumption behind Dobers and Hallin's (2009) analysis of different websites for Greater Stockholm municipalities, Lucarelli and Hallin's (2015) critical analysis of brand transformation process, and the positive and celebratory account of Stubbs (2016) on the resilience of the current branding for the City of Stockholm, one can discern that all those research articles contribute to creating a regime of knowledge which highlights in substance that the branding of Greater Stockholm as a type of policy process is not only much more complex than the one commonly presented in the literature, but it is also a process structured beyond purely market-led policy (Leys, 2003).

For the sake of explanation and in order to show how both theoretical analysis and empirical materialization conjointly contribute to creating a specific regime of knowledge of urban policy, in the case of Stockholm one can examine the most obvious empirical example used in several analyses of the branding of Stockholm, namely the presence of the counter-campaign “Das Kapital of Scandinavia”. More specifically, by analysing textual and visual elements of the counter-campaign manifesto as presented in alarmsthlm.com, one can easily recognize that those elements construct a similar and rather complex view of the branding of Stockholm which is, similar to arguments in theoretical analyses, portrayed as oppositional and conformational forms of urban policy.

The last three lines of the image above are crucial to better grasping its argument: *“With our campaign, we want to focus on urban politics, and what it should really be about. We are fighting to preserve the commons against monoculture and for a free city! Help us to bring politics back to the street, parks, squares and your neighbourhood because it is there they belong, and not on the stock market or in a closed room at the city planning office! The campaign is free for anyone to use. Resist! Take it back!”* In the formulation of the counter-campaign, apart from the adoption of the term “Das Kapital” as a resource with an obvious political reference, the mere observation that textual elements are employed in regard to the spatial and political dimension of branding concerning the “urban” can allow us to at least recognize that place branding is materializing as a particular type of “urban politics”. Upon closer examination, in fact, one can see in the text above how central, urban, and locational concepts such as “commons”, “street”, “parks”, and “neighbourhood” are used in contrast to “stock market” and “city planning office”.

It becomes thereby clearer that an empirical materialization, along with a theoretical analysis, also contributes to a regime of knowledge in which, as exemplified here, the empirical use of nouns related to the tangible and intangible urban environment *vis-a-vis* the theorization of tangible and intangible political and economic environments can be seen as contributors to an understanding of place branding that is characterized by the double dimension of urban politics, one low and one high (see Amin, 2004 for a similar debate). In the case of Stockholm, the “true” realms of (urban) politics are presented as the local, the near, the collegial, and the shared; this is in contrast to the global, the far, the delegated, the representative, and the excluded, which is where the present (urban) politics is acted out and shaped. Similarly, the above example helps to recognize that the creation of knowledge regimes – to which both practices and theories of place branding

contribute – is characterized by a complex view suggesting that (urban) politics is not merely something proper to the public realm, commonly understood as governed, managed, and acted out by public and political elected authorities; it is also matter of other economic and social agents and forces, as well as a matter of direct popular intervention and participation.

4. Problematising place branding as urban policy

Using the example of Stockholm to unpack the regime of knowledge production which positions place branding as a peculiar type of urban policy has led to the recognition that the emerging urban politics is characterized by a view depicting the (urban) politics of place branding as transcending the typical division between the public and the private, and the commercial and non-commercial. The example of the counter-campaign “Das Kapital of Scandinavia” allows us to see how the constitution of place branding is depicted as a powerful artefact in constructing different and new types of (political) actions in regard to an urban community. It also allows a suggestion that such an urban policy is not only grounded in private, commercial, and entrepreneurial philosophy which is colonizing the urban realm (see Harvey, 1989a, 1989b), nor is it merely creating a creolization of the public which has no effect on the private or commercial sphere (see e.g. Swyngedouw, 1996, 2006), but rather it is a form of processual hybridization of both realms (Sheller & Urry, 2003)

However, despite this recognition, previous research on place branding falls short of fully addressing this argument. I claim this because of a simple reason: previous studies are grounded in, and simultaneously contribute to, creating a regime of knowledge (i.e. place branding as extension of contemporary neoliberalism) which blocks any emancipatory theoretical or empirical analysis. In this regard, while the majority of critical studies on place branding, echoing Harvey's arguments, still recognize place branding as form urban practice embedded in neoliberal ideology (see e.g. Eisenschitz, 2010; Gertner, 2007; Jansen, 2008; Kaneva, 2011), other studies echoing the arguments of creolization recognize place branding efforts as politically-laden policies which are in some cases appropriated by interests and organizations that are not considered to be the prime targets of branding efforts (see e.g. Dzenovska, 2005; Graan, 2013; Kavaratzis, 2012; Mayes, 2008).

Especially this understanding holds that the success of place-branding processes is totally dependent on the ability to handle and manage the political structure of interests around the brand (see e.g. Hornskov, 2007; Pedersen, 2004; Stigel & Frimann, 2006) whereby political stability should be seen as a prerequisite for a successful place branding campaign (see e.g. Anholt, 2005; Fan, 2006; Youde, 2009). It follows that the process of place branding is recognized as being a powerful broadband instrument of urban policy with implications for many different policy areas spanning from education and business to tourism and social inclusion (see e.g. Ashworth, 2009; Berg & Björner, 2014; Eshuis, Braun, & Klijn, 2013; Eshuis & Edwards, 2012; Paganoni, 2012; Pasquinelli, 2010)

4.1. Unpacking the politics of place branding as urban policy

The analysis of the political dimension of place branding as urban policy is crucial for understanding the longevity and penetration of certain place brands compared to others. To do this requires an investigation of not just the communicative outcomes and the reception in targeted markets, but also of the processes through which the brands have been politically created, or what Ooi (2008) has termed “the politics of place branding”. Studies endorsing such a view have been pivotal in the project of understanding and performing an analysis of the politics of place branding as a democratic legal policy process (e.g. Eshuis & Edwards, 2012; Eshuis & Klijn, 2011; Wæraas, Bjørnå, & Moldenæs, 2014). Such literature has been attentive to

recognizing place-branding activities as politically appropriated by interests and organizations that are not being considered as the prime targets of the branding efforts.

Previous research endorses a functionalist conceptualization of politics conceptualizes politics in economic terms (e.g. Anttiroiko, 2014). Such a view, grounded on an empiricist and scientific view of politics, points out how place branding is an instrument (e.g. see Mayes, 2008), a political project (e.g. Kemming & Humborg, 2010; Lewis, 2011), materializing as a form of urban policy (e.g. Barr, 2012; Hülse, 2009; Shwayri, 2013) which sees the politics of branding as complex policy process that constitutes moral economics.

To be fair, even if those studies fall back on economic rationale, on the other hand, they should be praised for being significant forerunners in enabling an opening of the space for a “truly” political analysis of place branding as an urban policy which is more than a recognition of place branding as mere neoliberal propaganda-led activity (see e.g. Jansen, 2008; Rose, 2010). Previous research has clearly argued for the view of complex and multifaceted place branding as a form of urban policy. However, despite laudable attempts, previous research has not gone beyond a market-led determinist view (see Leys, 2003). In fact, in spite of the plurality of accounts, by implying an empiricist view of political theory which has been instrumental in offering the analyses of legal, functional, and networked dimensions of urban policies, they have fell short of unpacking the logic which makes this type of urban policy function and materialize (Pasquinelli, 2015). In other words, the previous literature, by praising the multifaceted and complex nature of place branding, has facilitated the creation of a hegemonic view on the “politics” of place branding, rather than avoiding it; this solidified the neoliberalist thesis regarding it as a “form of contemporary urban policy” (see Eisenschitz, 2010; Gertner, 2007; Jansen, 2008; Kaneva, 2011) which ultimately covers a more critical understanding of the political condition and “politics” of place branding.

To sum up the only possible way is to resolve the “hermeneutic block” that shapes the interpretative schemes of place branding (regarding both theory and practice) is to offer a novel, alternative approach. Whereas recent research has attempted to deal with this challenge by endorsing metaphors – for example Vanolo's (2017) usage of the “spectral” – in order to resolve this block, I instead endorse a series of terms (i.e. biopolitics, ecology and impolitical) that are constitutive of an ecological approach. Such an approach, inspired at large by Italian biopolitical philosophy (e.g. Agamben, 2011; Esposito, 2010), allows a disentanglement of the regime of knowledge that constitutes the common understanding of the politics of place branding.

An ecological approach allows us to overcome the problems present in previous research by putting politics and the economy at the same level of analysis; it does so in a way that embarks on a contextually biopolitical understanding of place branding, thus allowing analyses to move beyond neoliberalism, seen here as a “mere” contemporary series of events, by recognizing place branding as inextricably linked to modernity. This not only because, as pointed out by Agnew (1999), cities and urban agglomerates did not become more powerful on account of neoliberalism and neoliberal policies, but they have been historically and spatially framed and characterized beyond the labour-based (i.e. mercantilist, capitalist or neoliberal) structuring logic. Even more crucially, because the life of cities has historically emerged not merely as the total prevalence of the private sector over the public as a reflection of capitalist neoliberalism (see Harvey, 1989a, 1989b), but rather as a hybridization process (Hodges, 2012; Sheller & Urry, 2003; Weintraub, 1997) in which public-private, economic-political, commercial- and non-commercial logic is affecting each other in their emergence as complex organic practices. The next section offers an alternative understanding of the politics of place branding which endorses a more complex view of the type of urban politics.

5. Towards an ecological approach: theorizing place branding as urban policy

Previous research has helped to frame a view that answers questions of forms (i.e. “how” questions) rather than of context and content (i.e. “why” and “what” questions). In the search for the form of politics, those studies have led to over-focusing on analytical inquiry, or in other words, they did not ground the political dimension and their analytical inquiry in relation to the content and context of the political landscape in which place branding emerges. In response, in order to perform a “truly” political analysis of the politics of place branding, involving questions of value, substance and appearance (i.e. axiology), I claim here that a different way to approach the question of place branding as a form urban politics should be pursued. Such a way allows a consideration of the ideological condition in which place branding emerges, yet without blindly adopting a view that presents place branding as merely temporal, neoliberal-managerial practices applied to places (see Jansen, 2008; O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2000; Rose, 2010).

Previous literature concerning the political dimensions of place branding has either been concerned with issues of how politics should or ought to be thought of, analysed and researched (i.e. normativism) or how politics can be understood as it is, in its practices of becoming (i.e. empiricism), yet never conjointly. In so doing, previous studies have been essential in paving the way for present research, but their fragmented accounts have not helped establish any alternative view. The view proposed here instead aims to both prescribe and offer solutions to political problems (i.e. place branding); it also strives to offer a persuasive account of what the world of politics (i.e. urban politics) is like and how it relates to other societal dimensions (e.g. economy, culture, etc.). The ecological view presented here is embraced to offer a conceptualization of the politics of place branding as (im)political urban policy. In the next sections, such view is outlined according to different terms (i.e. biopolitics, ecology, and the impolitical) and its main tenets concerning the proposed conceptualization.

5.1. Biopolitics

Biopolitics, according to an ecological approach, is the conceptual term which refers to the contextual, historical-political horizon in which place branding emerges. Biopolitics here helps both to unpack the formation of the regime of knowledge of place branding as urban policy, and it problematizes the link to neoliberalism. Biopolitics is in fact used here as the alternative to neoliberalism because biopolitics, by implying a kairological view of space-time which thus allows the observation of embryonal features of place branding across time and space, does not firmly anchor neoliberalism to modernity and does not contextualize neoliberalist policy as a modern condition. More crucially this means also that biopolitics renders a conceptualization of place branding which does not assume that place branding is the materialization of neoliberalist policy understood as the last stages of capitalist modernity, but rather as the spatio-temporal coalescence of different domains (economics, politics, culture) which emerge according to an archeo-genealogical process of knowledge formation.

Previous research has advanced an understanding of urban policy as embedded in neoliberal conditions without questing the foundation of such a condition (see, for critique of neoliberalism, Brady, 2014; Flew, 2014). In so doing, these studies have proposed a view of policy that can be considered at any level of articulation in its finite and infinite possibilities, yet they have not conceptualized the “politics” of those possibilities.

By confusing politics – meaning the established institutional measures of organizing collective life with the political – meaning the eruptive events that reveal politics (see Stavrakakis, 2007) – previous research has been “trapped” in a view which assumes that neoliberal ideology is the context of the urban policy that characterizes place

branding. However, a critical approach to this argument should be brought to the fore. In fact, by simultaneously not denying the contextual neoliberal conditions (see Davies, 2014), and recognizing that the (political) legitimacy upon which the empirical practices of place branding are grounded is the widespread adoption of marketing and consumer vocabulary (e.g. Schwarzkopf, 2011), an analysis which is based in the biopolitical dimension of marketing should be endorsed. Here is the first tenet of the proposed conceptualization:

- a) Instead of adopting neoliberalism as a “mere” contemporary series of events, since place branding is also a matter of modern (political) legitimacy, I suggest that it is more instructive and eye-opening to draw on to notion of *apparatus* as framed by Agamben (2009). In this light, place branding should be understood as a (*bio*)political apparatus because, as shown by Agamben (2009, 2011), “apparatuses” are originally pure activities of governance devoid of any foundation that produces its own subject, which in late (neoliberal) capitalism are becoming processes of desubjectivation leading to the eclipse of politics (i.e. which presupposes the existence of subject) and the triumph of the *oikonomia* (i.e. pure activity of government that is aiming to achieve no goal higher than mere replication, as can be observed by the example of copy-cat branding campaigns that are produced by various cities).

Following the first tenet, place branding is an uncontrolled activity of government of life (city life) that instead of offering redemption to the city and the urban (i.e. a sense of citizenship, of belonging, and of a “true” higher standard of living), it may lead to possible catastrophes (i.e. gentrification, wasting public money, inter-urban conflicts).

Such an understanding of a biopolitical apparatus would require a different treatment of the politics: a view that sees politics as both consistent and constitutive. Biopolitics here then should be understood not only as a condition, but also as a way of thinking, analysing and theorizing that make a simultaneous “connection” and “disconnection”; it thus allows a simultaneous analysis of place branding practices to cut across different discourses and literature of reference (i.e. regional development, real estate, promotion, marketing). Such a view presented here embraces a type of theory of politics that is detached from both pure normativism and pure empiricism as the views presented in previous research on place branding. The view suggested here is both about political thinking and thinking about politics. It has a double function; on one hand, it offers solutions to political problems such as how to possibly solve gentrification caused by the marketing of places. On the other hand, it strives to offer a persuasive account of what the politics of urban policy is like and how it relates to other dimensions (economics, culture, etc.). Such an account, in which biopolitics is presented as a substitute to neoliberalism, leads to a specific understanding of biopolitics as an “ecologized” view of biopolitics. From this point comes the second tenet:

- b) Rather than a typology, one should understand the “politics” of place branding as ecological biopolitics. Instead of following biopolitics in Foucault’s terms as previous studies have done by claiming that the neoliberalism of place branding celebrates a new form of depoliticization by managing the population and its bodies in a regulation of life (e.g. Marzano & Scott, 2009; Varga, 2013), Here I draw from Italian biophilosophers (mainly Agamben, and Esposito) to suggest an “ecologized” biopolitics that does not only distance itself from the mere equation of “biopolitics = contemporary neoliberalism”. Rather, in regard to place branding, it offers a way to axiologically understand the connection between the life of cities as an ecological complex form, in which the relationships between the biopolitical regimes (branding *vis-à-vis* regional development) are seen as transversal emerging processes of urban policy formation. This, for example, can be traced in the commonly used concepts in policy documents and in marketing and

promotional materials through such terms as sovereignty, property, liberty, democracy, community, and participation when referring to the political dimension of place branding in the literature (see Eshuis & Edwards, 2012)

It is thus precisely this last understanding which I argue here to be the most fruitful in the case of place branding: place branding is a biopolitical apparatus for the reason that it has its modern origin in complex regime of knowledge constituted by the intersection of a political vocabulary in words such as sovereignty, democracy, community, and participation; this is combined with a contemporary economic vocabulary in words such as branding, competition, marketing, production, consumption, gentrification. Together this creates peculiar features of urban policy (place branding) which have a crucial influence on the mundane life of cities and urban agglomeration.

5.2. Ecology

The second main conceptual token of the proposed alternative understanding is *ecology*, which should be seen as the “modus operandi” of place branding as form of urban policy. Ecology, in other words, is what makes place branding as a biopolitical apparatus function on a theoretical level and for the analysis of its politics. Rather than a concept or a heuristic device, it should be seen as a style, as a manner of biopolitics emerging and acting in different directions. It is what characterizes the style of politics featured in place branding as way of thinking and doing research that recognizes the multiple connections that contribute to making place branding a mobile, performative and affective apparatus (e.g. Boland, 2013; Rabbiosi, 2016; Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011). All this leads to the third tenet:

- c) Instead of relying on an empiricist-normative understanding of politics, an ecological view conceptualizes politics as both consistent and constitutive; in so doing, it recognizes dichotomies such as the consumption-production pattern of urban policies as false. It implies a view of production and consumption of branding policies as a circular process of “translation” whereby the practices of transformation (as exemplified in the Stockholm example) should be understood neither as the pure power of (political) individuals and collectives in the face of a techno-industrial economic system, nor as a (political) demonstration of the ineluctable power of capitalism to subtly insinuate itself into every detail of lived experience.

An ecological approach to politics is about an ecology of complex practices. This is a way of thinking in order to consider both the major key (i.e. discourse, institutions) and minor key (i.e. practices, everyday life) of politics. It implies a political analysis which is attentive to the relation between place branding practices and theories as they diverge, in which their “mutation” does not only depend on humans. Further, an ecological approach implies an analysis in which the “becoming political” of place branding policy processes should not be analysed in artificial dichotomies, such as in the example at the beginning of the present text on discourses on branding *vis-à-vis* regional development, but co-jointly. All this brings us to a further implication which can be revealed in the subsequent tenet:

- d) Contrary to previous research which presupposes a view of the political in terms of social contracts as foundational *modus operandi* for place branding, an ecological view instead suggests a continuous politics as experimentations and innovativeness. This is however not naive empiricism, but rather a view that implies political conduct by the researcher that sees all varieties of urban policies as a “force” which are creators of the analytical reality we are researching (i.e. the case of Greater Stockholm in this sense is a creation of varieties of urban policies and, at the same time, a political creation by the researcher’s categorization). An ecological view suggests that place

branding should not be seen, and researched, as a sort of (political) social contract whereby humans come to an agreement about certain social conditions of co-living; it instead should be seen as an epistemic co-evolution constituting an area of political agonism (see also Mouffe, 1999, 2005). More specifically, such an understanding points out the *political potency* of controversies in creating both the empirical field for place branding research and the very case of the mere “possibility” of such (theoretical) research. This can be encountered in the experimentation of political practices that are done by both researchers (i.e. involved in creating place branding theories) and different stakeholders (i.e. involved in place branding practices).

Further, an ecological style indicates that observed political action (e.g. the process of creating new place branding campaigns or brand logos) is an ecology of complex practices because of its transaction and confederation of responses coalescing around a “problem”, namely the very materialization of place branding as form of urban intervention to ameliorate city life. By privileging the *epistemic*, ecological thinking implies that the way in which knowledge is construed is political since it is based on a view of politics that is “locational” (e.g. the creation of “place” brands as seen in the example of the branding of the Öresund region that helped to create a new functional region between Denmark and Sweden (see Boisen, 2015). This is in order to understand how certain items (for example, the idea of city brand equity and city rankings) came to be and how the impact should be seen as problematic for the epistemic life of cities.

In practical terms, the proposed view shows that place branding as form of urban policy should be conceptualized as always *in change*. This is in line with recent research suggesting that the politics of place branding could be at the same time researched and analysed conjointly as ideology (i.e. as a system of politicized views), as power-politics (i.e. as political camps and battles based on power [im]balances) and as an instrument (i.e. as political process and political activities) (see, in this regard, Kavatzis, Giovanardi, & Lichrou, 2017). An ecological style helps to analyse in more detail how the phenomena also labelled as “place branding” materialize and may be transforming and emerging as in the case of Greater Stockholm by the hybrid materialization of branding and regional development. This can occur through ideological interests that are not necessarily in line with the overall political position of those different stakeholders that have originally produced the brand, as in the case of the counter-branding campaign. It can also occur by opposition or resistance through politically communicative action that possibly leads to a politicization of the place brand itself as well as of the entire policy process.

5.3. Impolitical

The third main term of the ecological approach is the impolitical, which should be understood as the core of the politics of place branding. Drawing directly from Esposito's (1999) elaboration, the impolitical simultaneously expresses and signals the way in which place branding is materializing as a biopolitical apparatus, how it is functioning via an ecological style, and how it is ultimately affecting everyday political activities in urban areas. The impolitical in other words remains as the central term which ultimately explains and enables place branding to be understood as urban policy. It is the conceptual element helpful in seeking to develop a valuable comprehension of politics and make the politics of place branding much more explicit. Whereas neo-liberalism and the notion of politics as an economic system might obscure processes, biopolitics and the notion of the impolitical in fact clears them up. In other words, the impolitical in connection to ecology and biopolitics allows a consideration of the politics of place branding at the same time as the *politics on* and *politics of* the life of cities. Further, by implying an oblique contextual view of politics, not imbedded exclusively in normativism or empiricism, an impolitical approach is a

way to unpack the relationship between “politics” and “the political” in place branding. The following tenet further explains this reasoning:

e) Contrary to the current research which is silent on the relationship between urban political institutions (i.e. the political) and political activities (i.e. politics), the adoption of the *impolitical* allows a recognition that is neither a matter of the former nor the latter. The traditional view of politics assumes that the “political” is a process of the materialization of a certain type of politics or political modalities (e.g. Kavatzis et al., 2017). Here I maintain that it is useful but not sufficient to analyse how “politics” can take the form of different modalities and how those different political modalities can be traced to create different political views (i.e. compared to what is commonly understood in political theory as both normative and empiricist views). Instead, an impolitical view is a manner of thinking that does not see the nature of politics only as a simple process of subjectivization (i.e. identity politics). Rather, it allows one to see such a process in the context of the separation between politics (i.e. as politics in itself as an institutional practice) and the thinking of politics (i.e. the political), or in other words between the way place branding is appearing to us as daily political activities and the way those political activities are planned, thought out, idealized, and eventually analysed and researched.

The “politics” of place branding could be thought of as a politics that recognizes that any modality of politics (e.g. urban policy) is also a form of thinking and acting. It is moreover a politics that is the result of a “political condition which...produces effects” (Badiou, 2005, 55). It implies a politics that cannot not be a form of thinking in itself, thus producing political knowledge which is equivalent to political practices (e.g. empiricist inspired research both adopts and produces accounts based on an empirical view of politics which becomes both a form of ontology and epistemology). All this turn implies the following tenet.

f) Previous research that endorsed a normative and empiricist understanding of politics adopts a thinking about politics which cannot go beyond the same conditions upon which its own way of thinking is built (i.e. liberal, communist, socialist, realist, etc.). In other words, while current research sees the politics of place branding as (neo)liberal policy, thereby endorsing a (neo)liberal understanding of politics in analysing place branding, an impolitical view is instead grounded in biopolitics, and this is why it does not presuppose any political precondition. It follows that previous studies, by constructing an apparatus of thought that already has in place the answers to its own questions, treat politics through those usual schemes and analytical devices used in liberal political thinking – for example concepts such as democracy, sovereignty, legitimacy, property, ownership, and legality – that seek to reduce the antagonism which is characterizing politics. Instead, understanding politics as simultaneously the thinking of politics as transcendent and as immanent (see also the section above on *Biopolitics*) allows to shift the argument from *actual politics* to the *thinking of politics*, but also, to offer a diagonal reading of the impolitical (see the following subsection) that can be presented as able to refuse any traditional definition of politics in terms of Left, Centre, or Right.

6. The impolitical place branding

In this concluding section, I will spell out the politics of place branding as a form of urban policy emerging as *impolitical* place branding. This section will simultaneously function as a way to draw conceptual and analytical implications for research on the politics place branding (see Table 1)

Politics has often been at the centre of both classic and modern thinking, and it has either been presented as a form of *praktike politike* in an ancient Greek flavour (i.e. which for them was the political) or in its

Table 1
Summarizing the implication of an ecological approach for research on the politics of place branding.

Conceptual token for political place branding research	Current approaches	Ecological approach
<i>Historical-Political Horizon</i> <i>Onto-epistemological assumption</i>	Neoliberalism as spatial-temporal (political) economy Chronological view on the politics of place branding (and neoliberalism)	Biopolitics as politics of (City) Life Kairological view on the politics of place branding (and on neoliberalism)
<i>Core Political Assumption</i>	Politics as (Neo)liberal Politics Politics – as the established institutional means for organizing collective life with/Political - eruptive events that reveal politics	Politics as combination of different political views Impolitical as eruptive constructed biopolitical mechanism organizing collective life
<i>Eschatology of Politics</i>	Neoliberal annihilation of the public sector over the private Transformation of the public realm into the realm of private sphere	Biopolitical paradigm of exclusion and inclusion Process emerges from communality which at the same time is a celebration and negation
<i>Source of Political Legitimacy</i>	Place branding as colonization Place branding as neoliberalist form of economic sovereignty	Place branding as duty Place branding as biopolitical apparatus; emerging as pure activity of governance
<i>Nature of Politics</i>	The Political characterized as socio-economic politics Negative view of <i>the Political</i> as realm of neoliberal contemporary sovereignty	The Impolitical characterized as politics of possibility and agonism Both Negative and Positive view of <i>the Political</i> as the art of governing city life
<i>Form of Politics</i>	Politics structured as enemy-fiends relationship	Impolitical as both force and violence (i.e. as immunitarian system that both expose and protect)
<i>Axiology of Politics</i>	Empiricism or Normativism	Both Empiricism and Normativism
Analytical token for political place branding research	Current approach	Ecological approach
<i>Appearance of Politics</i> <i>Manifestation of Politics</i>	Political as the bright/recognizable/observable side Politics as Ideology, Instrument and Power	Impolitical as the dark/unwritten/unexplored side Politics as both (and in different combination) Ideology, Instrument and Power
<i>Focus of Politics</i>	Analysis of/on political practices vis a vis political theories	Analysis of/on ecologies of politics (co-emergence of theories and practices)
<i>Political Analysis</i>	Descriptive or Prescriptive Ostensive Based on Political Reality or Interpretation	Both Descriptive and Prescriptive Epistemic/Performative Based on Political Potency (i.e. unpacking the false dichotomy)
<i>Empirical Materialization (branding practices)</i>	Contributing to the descriptive or normative analysis of politics	Biopolitical regimes of knowledge creation (in connection with theories)
<i>Theoretical conceptualization (theories on place branding)</i>	Representing/Presenting (descriptive or normative) conceptualization of politics	Biopolitical regimes of knowledge creation (in connection with practices)
<i>Interpretative keys</i>	Theories, Models, Heuristic device and Metaphors	Style (of thinking and analysing)
<i>Role of Researcher</i>	Either active or passive creator of analysis	Active and reflexive (political participant)

more contemporary flavour as *politike okonomi* (see, for an explanation [Esposito, 1993](#)). Whereas the former understanding has much more to do with the concept that reflects commonly understood methods of doing and thinking in relation to the central issue of the polis's "just order", the former instead has another syntax that reflects a complex machine. This second understanding has at its core the issue of power and resistance, as well as the issues of command and obedience that emerge from such a complex machine. In other words, politics, as [Agamben \(2000\)](#) helps to unpack, in its modern-urban understanding has to do less with an "attribute" of the living being as such; rather, it should be understood more as an overreaching "apparatus" and not simply a subjective quality.

On the other hand, *the political*, and its relation with politics, has a more contemporary denotation. As explained by [Rancière \(2004\)](#), it does refer to the forms of politics similar to the "political interpretation of politics": the act of political intervention and the interpretation of such an act. Here, rather than imposing a thinking of politics onto the political, it assumes that the "political" should be the concept that is put to work within contemporary society. The "political" is therefore a concept – or as per [Esposito \(1993\)](#), it is a categorical term – that is in *action*. The "political" has therefore much to do with an approach that can take both negative and positive forms. In its negative form, it is grounded on the idea that "politics" is matter of friend/enemy *vis-a-vis* the "political" as the realm of sovereignty, i.e. the capacity to decide on whether a situation is normal or exceptional and thus whether to suspend the law, following [Schmitt \(1996\)](#), or in other words, as the state of exception characterizing political action in contemporary politics

([Agamben, 2000](#)). In its positive form, it is grounded in the recognition that only by putting aside politics as contemporarily understood (i.e. the politics of the parties) can the relation of morphosis between politics and the political be explicated in a manner which is most fruitful for society ([Esposito, 1993](#)); it signals a move away from a militant politics (i.e. Christian, liberal, socialist) and towards a more radical timeless and spaceless politics, seen as way of thinking about politics and the political – or in other words the *realm of the impolitical*.

This last understanding is what the present paper has attempted to bring to the fore. The politics of place branding as a biopolitical apparatus should be understood as way of thinking about the *realm of the impolitical*, a mode of seeing politics beyond the traditional way of thinking about politics. Thinking impolitically rather than politically means thinking in a transversal manner. Impolitical place branding signals that place branding as both political forms (urban policy) and the comprehension of politics (biopolitical apparatus acting as ecology) is neither an apolitical nor an anti-political attitude towards the urban, but rather it is the "space of a form of thinking from where alone, by contrast, the sphere of politics could be thought" ([Esposito, 1996: 228](#)).

In other words, the impolitical is not the opposite of the political (the non-political or the apolitical), but it is "the forgotten", "the unthought-of" aspects of the political (i.e. what is not explicitly visible and measurable such as the intertwining of regionalization and branding discourse seen in the example of Greater Stockholm). The impolitical is also a way of thinking about place branding as urban policy. It is not, however, exactly the same as the political (understood as an extension of friendship/enemy and dialogue among equals), as pointed out by

research on place branding. It is instead a comprehension of politics as a force (Bennett, 2009) that can be also beget violence (Besnier & Reid, 1990). An impolitical place branding that includes at the same time a politics as violence and the political as action means that in the branding of urban areas, the “politics” at hand is not a political action reduced to the fostering of life and the wellbeing of urban areas and its own inhabitants. On the contrary, it is a process that rejects the politics which has been traditionally understood by the research literature (i.e. as an ideology, as an instrumental process, or as power-politics see Kavaratzis et al., 2017); it implies a view that recognizes the simultaneous erosion (i.e. prohibitions, gentrification, etc.) of any political action and the creation of an *impolitical* place branding (in which the ownership of place brands as well place branding process is impossible for any stakeholders).

The alternative view offered here is similar to the metaphor of the “insurgent ghosts” that has been recently suggested by Vanolo (2017) but with some substantial differences in both forms and substance. First, the use of *impolitical* here is not as describing metaphor but as a term that at the same time describes and prescribes. Second, the crucial difference is in the conclusion of its use, namely in relation to the trajectory of place branding. In both cases, the process of place branding emerges as tragically paradoxical. Still, in the present view, such a process fosters a notion of the branded urban area as anything but a “common essence” or a “shared property” in which every stakeholder is involved, be it willingly, consciously or otherwise. Such a process implies a tendency to create a sense of ownership which is a reflection of a more common biopolitical paradigm upon which place branding activities are only exemplifications. The political aim of such a process is constructed around place branding as urban policy in which the promoted shared ownership and the sense of community enfold the centrality of the *proper* (e.g. public space as space of urban common property), whereby the process of branding an urban area should be thus understood as a process which attempts to construct a *common* – conceived as an original border – that shelters the *proper* from being expropriated. Here just think about the claim of Stockholm as “the Capital of Scandinavia” as way to protect the city against competition from other cities and at the same time build a community for all its inhabitants in the name of Stockholm as “the Capital of Scandinavia”, which is *proper* in the sense that it is the property of everyone and none at the same.

In other words, instead of creating the condition of “shared ownership” and “communality” as traditionally understood, the process of place branding, just because it begins in a realm of the *proper* – which delimits, builds identities, and makes spatial arrangements – is the process which emerges from a shared ownership and communality which at the same time is a form of celebration and negation. Just because the process of place branding requires an “obligation” or duty from every stakeholder involved (both those paying fees and those not paying fees to be part of a branding campaign as in the example of Greater Stockholm) to share and own the urban as something proper, the shared ownership and communality upon which the totality of place branding process are grounded (see “Stockholm the Capital of Scandinavia”) revises the boundaries between the private and the common, generates conflict, and furthers the separation of public-common versus private-property.

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