

# RECLAIMING SAINT MARK'S SQUARE IN DEFENSE OF VENICE AND THE PLANET: THE *NO SPACE FOR BEZOS* PROTESTS

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**ABSTRACT:** In late June 2025, billionaire Jeff Bezos and media personality Lauren Sánchez celebrated their wedding in Venice, Italy, turning the historic city and its lagoon into a spotlight for the lives of the super-rich. For decades, Venice has been struggling with global mass tourism, which negatively impacts not only the physical and natural environments but also the social and cultural realms inhabited by those who still live and work in the city. The *No Space for Bezos* protests, which took place before and during the ceremony, are the latest chapter in a long history of resistance against powerful global forces that determine the future of Venice. This article explores how activism against global mass tourism, climate change, and wealth inequality converged in the *No Space for Bezos* protests, and in particular investigates how, by reclaiming Saint Mark's Square – a space considered off-limits for political dissent – the activists temporarily challenged both discourses and practices that prioritize dominant spatial uses of the city as a space of consumption and value extraction, rather than as a lived space.

**KEYWORDS:** spatial politics, climate activism, wealth, policing, global mass tourism

Introduction: We can't afford the super-rich

Unless one belongs to the most affluent segments of the global population, our experience of wealth is mostly mediated or sporadic. We read news about the super-rich – including beloved celebrities – and consume fictional stories about their lifestyles and plights (e.g., the TV series *Succession* and *White Lotus*). We might walk by luxurious shops in London or even pose for a selfie next to a majestic yacht in Barcelona, but this does not imply proximity to that exclusive subgroup. Whether we like it or not, we are entangled with the wealthiest individuals; they have an impact on our living circumstances, and we contribute to their power in complex ways (not only material but also symbolically). With their almost unlimited resources, the super-rich can influence policy, demarcate societal expectations and neglect social responsibilities that supposedly apply to all of us. These elites can be understood as “engines of inequality”, not only because of economic distribution or political power, but also due to their power to define what is culturally desirable, or their “access to and control over institutions that help create social knowledge” (Khan, 2012, p. 373).

In the context of the climate crisis, the super-rich are contributing to global warming significantly more than the rest of us. A report on climate equality by Oxfam indicates that in 2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic, “the super-rich 1% were responsible for 16% of carbon emissions, which is the same as the emissions of the poorest 66% of humanity (5 billion people)” (Oxfam, 2023, p. 10). In the case of commercial aviation, the 1% of the world

population are reportedly responsible for circa 50% of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (Gössling and Humpe, 2020), particularly because of their use of private jets and the frequency of their movements. Private jet use also boomed during and after the pandemic, including both demand for aircraft purchases (Harvey, 2023) and charter services, some of which focused on “emerging” markets such as wealthy pets (Hardingham-Gill, 2021). As Barros and Wilk (2021) have pointed out, it is extremely difficult to assess the real carbon footprint of the super-rich, and the available data may be underestimated.

Political demonstrations against the super-rich class have become part of the repertoire of the climate movement. In April 2023, Extinction Rebellion activists in Berlin organised a march that ended at Brandenburg Gate, with participants dressing as wealthy individuals and dinosaurs representing the fossil lobby, carrying a pink rocket that symbolised the richest 1% leaving the planet behind. The demonstration concluded with an unauthorised occupation of the Hotel Adlon façade, where a huge banner with the phrase “We can't afford the super rich” was displayed along with smoke bombs and Extinction Rebellion flags (Figure 1). In October 2024, activists from the Extinction Rebellion and Scientist Rebellion chapters in Denmark performed a creative protest at Terminal 3 of Copenhagen Airport, with activists disguising themselves as bloodthirsty vampires representing the ultra-rich elite of Denmark, dancing to the tune of Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. LEGO's owner Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen (who allegedly owns three private jets), Minister for Foreign Affairs Lars Løkke Rasmussen, and Frederik X, King of Denmark were among the “life-sucking polluters” targeted by this Halloween-themed action (Scientist Rebellion Denmark, 2024) focusing on private jet use.



Figure 1 - An unauthorised protest at the Hotel Adlon in Berlin. The satirical demonstration by Extinction Rebellion targeted the super-rich and their impact on the climate (author's photo, 2023).

This article briefly addresses the recent protest events that took place in Venice, Italy, as part of the campaign *No Space for Bezos*. Considered the third-richest person in the world (*Forbes*, 2025), the chairman and founder of Amazon celebrated his wedding with media personality Lauren Sánchez in the World Heritage city in June 2025. Some of these protest events are exceptionally relevant considering that activists appropriated a space that is strictly off-limits to political dissent: Saint Mark's Square (mainly due to the 2009 Ministero dell'Interno ordinance). For years, local inhabitants and citizens have demanded the right to access Saint Mark's Square for their political needs, denouncing that the *piazza* has been commodified and touristified. This article continues previous explorations on the spatiality of dissent in Venice, and specifically on Saint Mark's Square as a contested political space (Araya López, 2021).

### The myth of Venice: Spaces of consumption and value extraction against lived space

Davis and Marvin (2004), in their seminal book *Venice: The Tourist Maze*, explain how the city has struggled with tourism for centuries. Tourists have long been attracted to the city due to its unique topography, becoming a mandatory stop for those undertaking the Grand Tour. The uninterrupted flow of visitors to Venice was perceived as a monetary opportunity, with locals offering accommodation while simultaneously decrying the vices that started to plague the city, which included the sex trade and gambling (particularly enticing for foreigners). When bridges and water buses started to connect the islets and gondolas lost their main function as a means of transport, gondoliers reinvented the business to entertain the tourist crowds. Literary works, paintings and early travel guidebooks made Venice a primary destination for many visitors from Europe and abroad.

The ongoing predicament with global mass tourism is of a different nature. In spatial terms, Venice was built for fewer pedestrians and smaller vessels. Both inner streets and bridges get clogged frequently, particularly those in the main routes that lead to popular tourist sites. The water canals were designed for boats that moved slowly through the lagoon, unlike the luxury yachts and cruise ships that still navigate the city (although the biggest cruise ships, which were contested for years, have been rerouted to nearby ports) (Araya López, 2022). The emergence of tourist rentals, particularly Airbnb, has negatively impacted the availability of affordable housing, contributing to the exodus and population loss that is reaching critical levels now. Since tourism is a pervasive force, based on an extractivist logic (Salerno, 2018), local businesses that provided services to the inhabitants have been substituted by those that favor the needs of tourists (however, it should be mentioned that e-commerce, which includes Amazon, has played a role in the demise of local shops in Venice and across Italy (Williams, 2025).

The emergence of low-cost airlines and relatively affordable cruise ships, as well as the hotel developments in nearby cities such as Mestre, has contributed to increasing the numbers of day-trippers visiting Venice. These temporary visitors have been scapegoated due to their limited spending and consumption behaviors, which has opened the door for a powerful narrative that prioritises wealthy, luxury tourism. The recent experiment of a visitor's fee, *contributo di accesso*, has been praised by local authorities precisely because it supposedly targets the low-spending subset of the day-trippers. In the past, other strategies to control tourist flows, such as the turnstiles at the entrance of the city, have been ineffective. Local inhabitants have also protested against these measures, either by forcibly removing the turnstiles (Zambenedetti, 2018) or by sharing codes with visitors to exempt them from the entry fee (Pietrobelli, 2024), explicitly denouncing that the city is becoming a theme park,

enclosed as if Disneyland, and enjoyable only for those willing to pay. The controversy regarding Bezos and Sánchez's wedding exemplifies these clashing views about the future of the city, making evident the insurmountable gap between those who believe this is the type of high-spending visitors that Venice urgently needs and those who advocate for detouristifying Venice.

Indeed, the myth of Venice works in synchrony with processes of mass consumption and capital accumulation. From this standpoint, Venice is perceived as a highly profitable open-air museum, a sort of background for movie productions, global mass tourism (for example, Instagram and TikTok content), advertising (e.g., Sony PlayStation 5) and professional wedding photography (which is quite common there). The spaces of the city are prioritised for contemplation, and to cater to the desires of a highly mobile class. While for local inhabitants, hanging their laundry outside a window is a mundane chore, for those visiting the city it is a sort of 'authentic experience.' The reality of Venice, however, is that of a city like any other. It has a complex history and identity struggles (for example, the resilience of the Venetian dialect), deep-rooted networks of solidarity, serious sociocultural and environmental challenges, spatial constraints and legal overlapping. For those who live, study or work in Venice, their lived spaces are inseparable from the global forces that draw millions of tourists to their city, and resistance to this entanglement is expressed either as micropolitics or as robust social movements and political organisations.

Understanding the right to the city as both the right to what already exists and the right to change it after our heart's desire (Harvey, 2003), the question of who has a right to Venice is not easy to answer. In terms of local politics, the inhabitants of the insular city, who are on the battlefield with tourism forces every day, might have a different idea of the future of Venice as compared to nearby residents of Mestre, who might profit from their proximity to this tourist hotspot with relatively limited negative impacts to their lives (although some 'externalities' like air pollution or real estate speculation do not concentrate exclusively in Venice). As a UNESCO World Heritage site, preservation of Venice and its surrounding lagoon might be more effectively attempted by international monitoring, which could bypass the self-serving interests of local tourism-oriented stakeholders and the Italian political class. Should second-home owners, who might spend limited time in Venice, have an equal say in the decisions about the city as those propertyless residents who inhabit this space every single day? Considering the power-geometries (Massey, 1991) of global mass tourism, do airlines and cruise corporations have more power to decide who will enjoy Venice and when, than local neighbor associations?

In the case of Bezos and Sánchez's wedding, the ceremony was expected to produce economic benefits for those providing goods or services. In a news article by *Vanity Fair*, local pastry maker Antonio Rosa Salva confirmed providing some traditional Venetian *biscotti* for the gift box (although not the wedding desserts), while emphasising that Venice is a "city of love" and that he struggled to understand the reasons behind the *No Space for Bezos* protests (Filini, 2025). The celebration also included the reservation of 30 elite water taxis and gondolas (Nadeau, 2025), with fake news circulating on social media claiming that Bezos had reserved "all taxis and gondolas" in Venice. This misinformation was contradicted by the local government in a statement (Comune di Venezia, 2025), with city authorities identifying that the event was planned to minimise disruption to the city, its residents and its visitors.

However, Bezos' wealth – and that of the distinguished wedding guests – would not only 'trickle down' to the local population in the form of consumption of goods or services, but

also as philanthropy. As reported by *The Art Newspaper*, Bezos donated three million euros to three organisations involved in the preservation of Venice and research about potential threats to the city such as climate change (Somers Cocks, 2025). Corila (Consortium for coordination of Research Activities concerning the Venice Lagoon system), Venice International University (VIU) and the UNESCO office would receive one million euro each (while Bezos wealth is estimated in 246.9 billion dollars and with the wedding ceremony costing between 47- 56 million dollars [Reuters, 2025]). As reported in *People*, Bezos and Sánchez declined to receive wedding gifts and asked their guests to donate money to the city instead (Naydenova and Trabattoni, 2025).

In summary, it is evident that the Bezos wedding ceremony constituted an influx of (some) money to the local economy and publicly advocated for the protection of the city and the lagoon. The *No Space for Bezos* protests, however, addressed important issues threatening Venice, our global society and the planet that go well beyond profit, growth and job creation. These protest events also campaigned for the preservation of Venice, but in different terms. They connected Venice to other social and ecological injustices, and they challenged established spaces of consumption and value extraction by temporarily using them for political goals.

### The *No Space for Bezos* protests

Bezos and Sánchez's wedding was a private event, of sorts. It was a ceremony in which two individuals committed to each other, not unlike millions of people do every year all over the world. The difference is that *this* wedding was also a major political and media opportunity. A political opportunity (Meyer, 2004), because critical issues such as wealth disparity and climate change could be easily highlighted. The guest list also included important figures of the political sphere, such as Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner, and although U.S. President Donald Trump was reportedly invited, he did not attend (Millward, Squires and McKenna, 2025). The presence of other celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey, Leonardo DiCaprio and fellow billionaire Bill Gates ensured extensive news coverage and social media debate, turning the event into a valuable media opportunity (Cable, 2016).

The mobilisation of over 90 private jets and several luxury yachts (Giuffrida and Jones, 2025), which represents not only rampant consumption by the super-rich but also serious environmental impacts, is one of the subjects that encouraged a global public debate regarding wealth taxation, fair mobility and sustainable development. In the report by Oxfam, the 2019 emissions of the super-rich 1% were considered enough to cause 1.3 million excess deaths due to heat, and these emissions also cancelled out the benefits of about one million onshore wind turbines (Oxfam, 2023, p. 10). The *No Space for Bezos* protests targeted wealth disparity and the systems that facilitate capital accumulation and threatened to ridicule the elegant ceremony with inexpensive objects such as huge banners and inflatable crocodiles (Giuffrida, 2025), which allegedly forced the couple to relocate one of their exclusive events from the Scuola della Misericordia to the Arsenale (Gambirasi, 2025).

Table 1 summarises the protest events that took place in Venice both in anticipation and during Bezos and Sánchez's wedding ceremony (hereafter referred to as the *No Space for Bezos* protests):

Araya López: Reclaiming St. Mark's Square - The *No Space for Bezos* protests

Date	Location	Description
June 12th	San Giorgio Maggiore	A banner with the last name Bezos crossed out by a red "x" was displayed in the bell tower of the San Giorgio Maggiore Basilica. Activists also used smoke bombs.
June 13th	Rialto Bridge	A banner with the inscription "No Space for Bezos" and a spaceship was unfurled at the Rialto Bridge. A public assembly to discuss upcoming protest events took place in nearby Campo San Giacomo.
June 23rd	Saint Mark's Square	Eight activists from <i>Greenpeace Italia</i> and the British group <i>Everyone Hates Elon</i> unfolded a 20x20 m banner with a picture of Jeff Bezos laughing, along with a slogan in black, bold letters saying: "If you can rent Venice for your wedding, you can pay more tax."
June 24th	Saint Mark's Square	A golden statue of Bezos with his arms extended, covered in fake one-dollar bills with the inscription "TRUST ME" and Bezos portrait, was placed in front of the Saint Mark's Basilica. Loose fake-dollar bills and corn lay at his feet. The statue was installed by the anonymous art collective <i>Konn Artiss</i> .
June 24 <sup>th</sup>	Riva degli Schiavoni	Activists from <i>Extinction Rebellion Italia</i> climbed a crane near the luxurious Hotel Danieli and displayed a banner with the slogan in Italian "Tax the rich to give back to the planet", along with Extinction Rebellion flags. Other activists, some of them wearing Robin Hood hats, held signs and distributed flyers.
June 25 <sup>th</sup>	Rialto Bridge	The collective <i>Konn Artiss</i> released a mannequin of Bezos, which floated around the Grand Canal among gondolas and vaporetti. The mannequin, dressed in a blue jumpsuit, was grabbing onto a large Amazon package, while holding fake dollar bills in its hands.
June 26th	Saint Mark's Square	Extinction Rebellion Italia activists performed a mock wedding in the piazza with a masked groom and bride, keeping four black figures on a leash, representing MEDIA, BUSINESS, GOVERNMENTS and JUSTICE. Other activists held signs in Italian and English, referencing issues such as Gaza, drought and wealth disparity. An activist climbed a pole and unfurled a black banner with the statement: "The 1% ruins the world".
June 26th	Riva degli Schiavoni	A figure of Bezos sitting on a toilet over a large Amazon package, with fake dollar bills at his feet, was holding a newspaper called " <i>The Washington Ghost</i> " with the headline "Man orders bride". This installation, entitled "Pre-Wedding Nerves", by <i>Konn Artiss</i> included the artists holding two black umbrellas with the words "TRUST" and "ME" (as well as the letters K O N N on the backs of their suits).
June 26th	Saint Mark's Square	A laser projection on the Saint Mark's Campanile displayed written messages such as "NO KINGS, NO BEZOS", "FUCK OLIGARCHS", "NO BEZOS, NO WAR", "FCK BZS" and the date, time and place of the upcoming march. A silhouette of Bezos' head was also projected, with an inverted Amazon logo creating a sad face.
June 28th	Venezia Santa Lucia - Rialto Bridge	A march from Venezia Santa Lucia station to Rialto Bridge, with activists carrying banners, signs and flags. A banner with the inscription "No Space for Bezos" and a spaceship was displayed at Rialto Bridge. Activists also used colourful smoke bombs.

Table 1 - Protest events and other spatial interventions in Venice over the Bezos and Sánchez wedding. (Source: author, based on data published by the campaign groups, social media posts and news articles)

Not unlike the protests against big cruise ships, the No Space for Bezos protests were preceded and complemented by a series of visual elements such as stickers, posters, and graffiti (Everyone Hates Elon, 2025). The No Space for Bezos is a play on words that functions on two levels: first, by stating that there is no space for the billionaire in Venice (and implicitly regarding the super-rich class in our global society threatened by both ecological and societal collapse), and second, by commenting on the space colonisation fantasies of the super-rich, which is also depicted by the inclusion of rockets in the logo of the movement and in several banners. This detail is important since the super-rich are the main market of space tourism ventures, which include Bezos' own company Blue Origin. In their statement for the banner action (Greenpeace International, 2025), a spokesperson from the collective Everybody Hates Elon declared:

*As governments talk about hard choices and struggle to fund public services, Jeff Bezos can afford to shut down half a city for days on end just to get married. Just weeks ago he spent millions on an 11 minute space trip. If there was ever a sign billionaires like Bezos should pay wealth taxes, it's this.*

However, the discontent about Bezos did not focus exclusively on issues of taxation or limit itself to the protest events mentioned in Table 1. On June 6, 2025, Laguna Pride took place across the streets of Venice, consisting of a queer march defined as anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-fascist and transfeminist. In 2023, the first Laguna Pride was held in the city, after a long pause of several years (Ducoli, 2023). In 2015, current Mayor of Venice Luigi Brugnaro stated that “there will never be a gay pride in my city” (Longo, 2015), although he later “changed his mind” after a public confrontation with British pop star Elton John (*Venezia Today*, 2015). Earlier that year, Brugnaro also banned 49 children's books depicting same-sex families and disability, by removing them from local schools (Povoledo, 2015). Laguna Pride, therefore, is a demonstration of resistance against power (both conservative local authorities and Italy's national government headed by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni), and the 2025 march included a public call to demonstrate against Bezos, mainly because Amazon removed sections on equity for LGBTQ+ and Black populations from its company policies ahead of Trump's second administration (O'Donovan, 2025), which was denounced by the activists (Laguna Pride, 2025). Same-sex marriage is still unrecognised in Italy, although civil unions have been registered since 2016 (Görgei, 2016). The question of who can marry in Venice is of relevance here, even if the Bezos and Sánchez wedding was mainly symbolic.

For years, the *Assemblea Sociale per la Casa* (Social Assembly for Housing, hereafter ASC) has been campaigning for affordable housing, against evictions and the forced exodus of residents, as well as repurposing unoccupied properties as a potential solution for this housing ‘scarcity.’ ASC is active not only in Venice, but also in the mainland communities of Mestre and Marghera. In a recent documentary entitled *Squatting Venice* (Sabbie, 2024), members of the ASC explain their reasons for occupying derelict, public housing apartments, which is mainly due to necessity but also as a political statement. Global mass tourism and the demand for tourist rentals, particularly on platforms such as Airbnb, have become a major issue in Venice and other Italian cities (including Florence and Milan). On June 25, 2025, members of the ASC coordinated an anti-eviction action in Sacca Fissola, on Giudecca Island, emphasising the contrast between billionaires like Bezos who can “rent the city for three days” (ASC Venezia, 2025), and those like Francesca who live and work in Venice but are threatened with expulsion. Francesca, who works as a cleaning worker in a theatre and is now at risk of eviction, reportedly survives on a 600 EUR budget per month (Lattanzi, 2025). This anti-eviction action included signs with statements such as “Less Bezos, more

houses” and “Venice is not for sale”, and it received minor coverage in the Italian press (Lattanzi, 2025)

Both Laguna Pride and the anti-eviction action by ASC highlight how complex protest events in Venice are, and how social movements and campaign groups advocate for the needs of those who inhabit the city and those experiencing diverse forms of oppression and exclusion. On June 28, 2025, the march from Venezia Santa Lucia station to Rialto Bridge similarly conflated several political causes, with activists carrying Palestinian flags along the rainbow Peace flag, as well as those of the anti-fascism action and Extinction Rebellion. *No Grandi Navi*, which has been actively campaigning against big cruise ships and for the detouristification of Venice for over a decade, also participated in the demonstration. Other local causes such as the fight against the incinerator in Porto Marghera, which campaigns for cleaner air and the right to health, were also present with their characteristic yellow flags depicting a gas mask. Although all these diverse groups defend interests that are critical to residents and inhabitants of both Venice and the mainland, Mayor Luigi Brugnaro sided with Bezos and criticised the protests (Al Jazeera, 2025):

*Bezos embodies the Venetian mentality. He is more Venetian than the protesters,” said the centre-right mayor, adding that he hoped Bezos would return to the city to do business.*

#### Discussion: Why do the unauthorised protests at Saint Mark's Square matter?

Four of the *No Space for Bezos* protests temporarily appropriated the most historically relevant and largest square in the city, challenging the preferred (and profit-oriented) uses of this space and proposing new narratives about Venice, the planet, and social justice. The 2009 ordinance against political demonstrations has been contested for several years, and the collective Comitato per la restituzione di Piazza San Marco alla città di Venezia (Committee for the Restitution of St. Mark's Square to the City of Venice, hereafter CRPSM) attempted to challenge the ban within the legal system, but their appeal was considered inadmissible (Bison, 2025a).

After the collision of the *MSC Opera* cruise ship against the docks and another vessel in 2019, a massive march campaigning against cruise tourism and for the safeguarding of Venice was prevented from reaching Saint Mark's Square (Araya López, 2021). Some ‘disobedient’ activists entered the piazza and managed to move around waving *No Grandi Navi* flags and secured a group photo. The Prefecture of Venice threatened to take legal action against them (*Il Gazzettino*, 2019). In November 2019, the CRPSM requested permission for a protest at Saint Mark's Square, which was rejected by the local authorities (La Nuova di Venezia e Mestre, 2019). The CRPSM announced their intention to challenge this decision legally, considering the prohibition unconstitutional.

In December 2019, after requesting permission for an informal meeting to enjoy a coffee at the square, activists occupied a flooded Saint Mark's Square and performed live music, including chants decrying how Venice was being transformed by global mass tourism. Although at first sight the event might appear as a social encounter or an artistic performance, the act was highly political, constituting a sort of *hidden transcript* challenging institutional power behind the “back of the dominant” (Scott, 1990, p. xii).

The *No Space for Bezos* protests were more explicit about their political nature. In the case of the Greenpeace action, the unfurling of the banner with a laughing Bezos and the statement "If you can rent Venice for your wedding, you can pay more tax" was planned to be quick and to create a 'photo op.' The protest event was interrupted by the police, and the banner was confiscated. In spatial terms, Saint Mark's Square was the most significant location for this action. Not only is the piazza emblematic of Venice and historically a center of power, but there are few other options in Venice where such a banner could be photographed as clearly from above (arguably Campo San Polo, Campo Santa Maria Formosa or certain waterways and parts of the lagoon). The aerial view of Saint Mark's, however, complements the written statement by unequivocally showing Venice (Figure 2), which is being commodified for those with the ability to pay. While this action was interrupted by local police (Figure 3), aerial views of Saint Mark's Square have been oftentimes produced with the support of local authorities, such as when Sony launched its PlayStation 5 with a laser show (*Esquire* 2020), which required the temporary enclosure of the square.



Figure 2 - A 20mx20 m banner by Greenpeace unfurled at Saint Mark's Square, with the city of Venice in the background. (© Greenpeace / Michele Lapini, 2025)



Figure 3 - A local police officer stands next to the banner depicting a laughing Bezos. (© Greenpeace / Michele Lapini, 2025)

The second protest event, by the anonymous collective Konn Artiss, is another type of tactic and spatial configuration. Instead of relying on human bodies and a banner, a sculpture of Bezos was 'abandoned' in the square. As documented by Konn Artiss (2025), the golden Bezos covered in fake dollar bills attracted the attention of passers-by and some pigeons. The spatial needs of the action are minimal, although it could be argued that the corn placed at Bezos' feet is indeed sanctionable, since feeding pigeons is strictly prohibited, as communicated in the list of offenses targeted by the *EnjoyRespectVenezia* campaign (Araya López, 2020). The golden Bezos was taken away by the local police. Unauthorised, abandoned art with political content is also not rare in Saint Mark's Square, including a 200 kg penis covered with a face mask (Costa, 2020) and also Banksy's 'Venice in oil' installation (Fullin, 2019), which depicted Venice threatened by a huge cruise ship. Certainly, the political intervention by Konn Artiss could have been done almost anywhere in Venice, but once again the symbolic value of the square ensures political significance. Konn Artiss, indeed, used various city spaces for their political art, as detailed in Table 1.

The mock wedding by Extinction Rebellion Italia is a more complex protest event (Figure 4). First, the protest is peaceful (or non-violent, if one prefers) and creatively occupied the piazza, with both the groom and bride producing an aesthetic typical of traditional Venetian events such as the Carnival (and tourists wear such masks around Venice all the time). Other activists held signs, and one climbed a pole to display a banner with the statement "The 1% ruins the world" (Figure 5). Once again, the protest was interrupted by the local police. A total of 43 individuals were removed by the police, which allegedly included 2 bystanders (Gambirasi, 2025).

According to Extinction Rebellion Italia sources, the demonstration lasted under 30 minutes. Police removed the activists by grabbing them by their wrists and ankles (Figure 6), and some injuries were caused as a result. Once in police custody, activists were held for hours, and proof of identification was requested by the authorities. One activist reportedly suffered a stress-induced episode. Activists were accused of failing to provide notice for the demonstration (which would have been refused under the 2009 ordinance anyway), resistance to public officers, and for sitting in the square (an offense also banned as part of the *EnjoyRespectVenezia* campaign). For this reason, some of the activists received a DASPO, an order to keep away from Venice for 48 hours (Bison, 2025b). Extinction Rebellion Italia sources also remarked that some climbing equipment, including helmets and ropes, were confiscated by the authorities. The justification to hold this action at Saint Mark's Square included both the right to access public spaces and the “popularity” of the space, as well as physical elements such as the presence of poles (personal communication).



Figure 4 - The mock wedding protest at Saint Mark's Square, with activists holding signs and tourists observing and recording the event (Extinction Rebellion Italia, 2025)



Figure 5. - An activist climbed a pole at the square and displayed a banner with the inscription "The 1% ruins the world". (Extinction Rebellion Italia, 2025)

The rapid police intervention and repression of this non-violent protest by Extinction Rebellion Italia could be understood in at least three levels. First, it effectively enforces the 2009 ordinance, sending the political message that "order" must be restored, and the power of the State is absolute. The protest is interrupted irrespective of any concerns about whether the inhabitants/activists of Venice have a right to reinvent this space or not. Second, the intervention prevents the recording (i.e., videos and photographs) and diffusion of the protest event, functioning as a form of censorship. By removing both bodies and the objects of dissent, the media and political attention that the campaign groups sought is deliberately reduced. The spontaneous exchange of ideas in public spaces is also hindered, since anyone around the square who might have a legitimate interest in the cause and rationale of the protest is prevented from interacting with the activists. Third, the dominant uses of the square are reinforced, freed from the 'disruption' caused by the activists. The main users of the square, the tourists, are now able to transit, photograph, consume and leave the space whenever they get tired of it, which subsequently frees space for a new wave of tourists to hit.



Figure 6 - The activist who played the bride is being carried away from Saint Mark's Square by several police officers. (Extinction Rebellion Italia, 2025)

The fourth protest at Saint Mark's Square was even less invasive in terms of spatial requirements. The laser projection on the Saint Mark's Campanile happened in the evening, when tourist flows in the city tend to decrease. The protest was also interrupted after a few minutes (Bolzani, 2025). The laser projection was temporary in nature, and it conveyed a message by using light and a symbol of Venice as a background. In the past, the bell tower has also been used for other sanctioned laser projections, including one in defense of global mass tourism during the pandemic, when the words "Risorgiamo Italia" (Let's rise again, Italy) were projected to demand the re-opening of the city. The silent 'flashmob,' as referred to on the site of the local government (Comune di Venezia, 2020), included the presence of Mayor Luigi Brugnaro and key local tourism entrepreneurs. Why was this protest tolerated at Saint Mark's Square in 2020 while the *No Space for Bezos* protest in 2025 was censored? In 2019, both Palazzo Ducale and the Campanile were used as background for an "immersive spectacle" to promote the blockbuster film *Spider-man: Far from Home*, an event that consisted of a series of holographic projections and which was also promoted by the local authorities (Comune di Venezia, 2019).

It is important to emphasise that the four *No Space for Bezos* protests that happened at Saint Mark's Square were non-invasive (in terms of spatial use) and non-violent. The unauthorised character of the protest did not translate into serious risks to the physical environment, as is frequently argued about more radical politics such as (washable) paint-throwing protests that have occurred in various European cities and cultural sites, such as Brandenburg Gate in Berlin by Letzte Generation (Frost, 2023) or the World Heritage site of Stonehenge by Just Stop Oil (Morris, 2024). In December 2023, Saint Mark's Basilica was coated with both mud and the chocolate-flavored drink Nesquik in an action organised by activists from Ultima

Generazione – Fondo Riparazione to highlight the dangers of sea-level rise and climate change (Venezia Today, 2023). The protest captured limited media attention, but their tactics were promptly framed as pointless vandalism and damage to heritage. The *No Space for Bezos* activists respected the historical value of the square and creatively devised tactics that were effective in communicating their cause, without relying on force or endangering the users of this space. Indeed, each one of the protests was exemplary for its non-violent nature. In the case of the Extinction Rebellion Italia protest, the resulting “disorder” was caused by the police intervention. This repressive policing was criticised by several political representatives, including Monica Sambo, councilor for the Democratic Party in Venice and Rachele Scarpa, Member of the Chamber of Deputies for the Democratic Party (Bison, 2025b).

In *La Piazza di Venezia*, a short documentary produced in 2025, local inhabitants in Venice explain how Saint Mark's Square has been turned into a monofunctional space, serving mainly the needs of global mass tourism while losing other civic and political uses that characterised the piazza as the core of Venice (P.E.R. Venezia Consapevole, 2025). Tourism flows are so massive that Venetians tend to avoid the square. The documentary includes photographs from former massive demonstrations that occurred in Saint Mark's Square, long before the 2009 ordinance. The loss of this social and political space is tangible in the testimonies of the inhabitants, who emphatically point out the need to return this space to the city, which would require not only political will but also significant tourism degrowth.

In spatial terms, the *No Space for Bezos* protests temporarily disrupted dominant uses of Venice as a space of consumption and value extraction and reclaimed it as a lived space, serving the political needs of the local inhabitants. Saint Mark's Square remains a contested political space, shaped by both local resistance and global forces. Some days after the Bezos and Sánchez ceremony, a series of concerts took place in the square again, including U.S.-American singer Patti Smith and Italian pianist Ludovico Einaudi. These dominant uses of the square are highly political, and they also offer proof that massive events at Saint Mark's Square are possible, since they do not necessarily imply a threat to preservation or require excessive security measures.

Saint Mark's Square, in short, exemplifies a sort of *functional enclosure*. The space appears to be open to all, but the events that take place in the piazza seem to be dependent on monetary exchange (or the preference of local authorities). This loss of shared, public city spaces is not exclusive to Venice. In Barcelona, activists have been demanding the return of Park Güell to the city inhabitants (Arias-Sans and Russo, 2016), although this enclosure is more physical. Barriers to block tourists from causing serious disruption to local lives have emerged in Austria (Wilson, 2023) and Japan (Marcus, 2024). In the Netherlands, the village of Zaanse Schans is discussing an entry ticket (*NL Times*, 2025), like the one recently introduced in Venice. Tourists are overcrowding Machu Picchu and even Antarctica. How do we control these massive flows? How do we prevent the deterioration of our communities and cities, and the environmental degradation that is tied to this complex, global industry? Should the super-rich have priority use of our common spaces? The *No Space for Bezos* protests exemplify local resistance to spatial exclusion and the commodification of shared public spaces.

Finally, the *No Space for Bezos* protests also matter because they might contribute to fostering a much-needed national and global dialogue on taxation and wealth. Glasius (2025), by investigating “rich list journalism”, demonstrates that the 2008 global financial crisis shifted the narratives about the super-rich, leading to more media scrutiny regarding

issues such as legal tax avoidance and the legitimacy of wealth. The protest events in Venice received significant media coverage, and by mocking Bezos as a representation of the super-rich class, they engaged in a form of shaming. Barros and Wilk (2021) argue that shaming campaigns might be effective to pressure the wealthy to reduce their consumption, and that they might have a disciplinary component. The *No Space for Bezos* protest targeted not only the extravagance of the wedding ceremony and the super-rich class but also denounced the complicity of local, national, and global authorities. The super-rich have been allowed to accumulate massive wealth and power, and their lifestyles are effectively destroying our shared environment and endangering billions of human and non-human lives. The *No Space for Bezos* protests called this 'global order' into question by emphasising the needs of the 99%: affordable housing, environmental protection, justice and peace for all.

A Greenpeace campaigner expressed this unequivocally in their statement for the banner action (Greenpeace International, 2025):

*While Venice is sinking under the weight of the climate crisis, billionaires are partying like there is no tomorrow on their mega yachts. This isn't just about one person — it's about changing the rules so no billionaire can dodge responsibility, anywhere. The real issue is a broken system that lets billionaires skip out on their fair share of taxes while everyone else is left to foot the bill. That's why we need fair, inclusive tax rules, and they must be written at the UN.*

## Conclusions

Contrary to several interpretations and commentaries in both global media and social networks, the recent protests in Venice were not a personal attack against Jeff Bezos or Lauren Sánchez. As this article has discussed, the *No Space for Bezos* protests were complex political events that included a wide variety of goals, from wealth taxation to peace in West Asia. The main motivations, however, were related to serious issues regarding environmental protection and global mass tourism, which are key in any effort to safeguard Venice and its lagoon (and the planet, which was also explicitly referenced in the protests).

While for some critics the *No Space for Bezos* protests were another manifestation of anti-tourism, and the "same old politics of envy" that affect activists who should "stop whining" (Jackman, 2025), the *No Space for Bezos* protest fostered a global debate on issues that concern us all, such as the high-carbon lifestyles of the super-rich, the climate crisis, and the right to our cities. The global debate that the protest events fostered is also essential for contemporary democracies, in Italy and abroad, since it positively impacts processes of opinion-formation and decision-making. In the specific case of the super-rich and taxation, more research is required to fully understand how these protest events in Venice, and other targeting the wealthiest class all over the world, are contributing to change social perceptions on the legitimacy of wealth, wealth caps and the environmental impact of the super-rich.

Venice is significantly threatened by climate change, and the protection of its surrounding lagoon and natural spaces has been key for social movements and campaign groups for decades. The *No Space for Bezos* protests, by occupying the city and defying dominant narratives about public spaces such as St Mark's Square, address another important crisis lurking in the dark: that of the loss of our political rights and the spaces that are essential for our democracies to function.

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