



Lost in complexity, found in dispersion: 'Peripheral' development and deregulated urban growth in Rome



Luca Salvati

Consiglio per la Ricerca in Agricoltura e l'analisi dell'economia agraria (CRA), Via della Navicella 2-4, I-00184 Rome, Italy

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ABSTRACT

This study sheds light on the recent development of a Mediterranean urban region (Rome, Italy) identifying key factors of regional competitiveness in the light of the observed strengths and weaknesses of local governance. The influence of planning practices inspired to the European Spatial Development Framework on metropolitan regions featuring traditional settlement patterns, socioeconomic disparities and an imbalanced governance system has been discussed in the case for Rome, a city experiencing dispersed expansion and economic growth at the periphery of Europe. While focusing on 'European' or even 'global' city models, developmental policies in Rome resulted sometimes in the simplification of the competitiveness issue considered as a mere spatial economic problem. Planning strategies decoupled from the local context may impact negatively economic competitiveness, social structures and the environment, proving at the same time the importance of policies designed for 'non-global' cities.

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1. Introduction

Even in a post-industrial era dominated by internet, delocalized production chains and rapid socio-demographic changes, large urban regions are still considered the most important economic space in the world (Sassen, 1991; Scott, 2001a,b). In an effort to link form and functions of cities, recent studies have related the economic success of firms to non-economic, place-specific variables, among which social networks, informal relationships and knowledge spill-over, were recognized as relevant growth factors (see, among others, Harrison, 2007; OECD, 2006; Vanolo, 2008; Vanolo, 2015). Research on the prominent factors determining urban competitiveness thus focused on regionalization processes and relational approaches (Taylor, Catalano, & Gane, 2002a,b; Gonzales, 2011; Townsend, 2009). Based on these premises, Taylor (2004) identified the 'global city regions' as the leaders of the world urban hierarchy and Scott (2001a,b) suggested that competitive firms benefit largely from location within mega-city regions, seen as basic engines of the global economy.

Global city regions play a role of strategic nodes attracting top-ranking functions and concentrating hard and soft infrastructures, multi-cultural life and talent (Kratke, 2001). Hall and Pain (2006) defined polycentric city regions as "a series of anything between ten and fifteen cities and towns, physically separated but functionally networked, clustered around one or more larger

central cities, and drawing enormous economic strength from a new functional division of labor. [...] It is no exaggeration to say that this is the emerging urban form at the start of the 21st century". Polycentric spatial organizations often reflected a dispersed and discontinuous urban form (Jonas & Ward, 2007) with a high rate of land consumption (Salvati, 2014).

Mediterranean urban regions are hardly recognizable as global city regions. Located in-between north-western affluent cities and the developing agglomerations of the world 'south', the majority of Mediterranean cities is characterized by peculiar socioeconomic traits diverging from those observed in northern and western countries (Salvati & Gargiulo Morelli, 2014). Hyper-compact forms and dense settlements, poorly-organized public services, limited infrastructural networks (Krumholz, 1992) and the 'vertical' class segregation are key attributes representing the history of these cities (Leontidou, 1990). These elements add to the traditional 'horizontal segregation' (Maloutas, 2007) and to a 'popular land control' manifested through informal constructions, spontaneous settlements and a deregulated urban planning (Allen, Barlow, Leal, Maloutas, & Padovani, 2004).

'Economic informality', 'social adaptability' and 'popular creativity' contributed to determine the urban asset of several Mediterranean cities since the early 1990s (De Muro, Monni, & Tridico, 2011, but see also Lemanski, 2007). While nowadays these cities are actively competing for a stable position among the most rich European cities, their morphology and functions - tightly linked with their long-term development path - act as a serious

E-mail address: luca.salvati@entecra.it

limit to this challenge (Kasanko et al., 2006; Longhi & Musolesi, 2007; Turok & Mykhnenko, 2007).

The millenary history of the Mediterranean region – together with unique landscapes shaped by a complex interplay of social, economic, political and institutional factors (King, Proudfoot, & Smith, 1997) – justifies the specific production modes observed at the regional scale and the dominant economic and social structures found at the local scale. These structures are deeply influenced by factors such as the ‘social formation’ issue, including subordinate economic forces and social classes among which unemployed or under-employed people and working poor are relevant actors (Allegretti & Cellamare, 2008; Monclús, 2000, 2003; Salvati & Gargiulo Morelli, 2014). As far urban competitiveness, the general picture is quite disconcerting (e.g. De Muro et al., 2011; Gemmiti, Salvati, & Ciccarelli, 2012) even with the marked heterogeneity in development patterns being observed at the local scale. Single success stories cannot be taken as a rule for the whole region and have been questioned as far as their general relevance is concerned (see, for instance, Busquets, 2006; Capel, 2005; Casellas, 2006 for the Barcelona case).

Urban sprawl determined recent transformations in Mediterranean cities (Salvati & Gargiulo Morelli, 2014). The diffusion of sparse, low-density settlements driven by population de-concentration was observed since the early 1980s producing mixed landscapes with characteristics *in-between* urban and rural areas (Alphan, 2003; Catalàn, Sauri, & Serra, 2008; Salvati & Sabbi, 2011; Terzi & Bolen, 2009). Distinct motivations indicate southern Europe as a relevant case for understanding long-term dynamics of discontinuous and dispersed urban expansion. First, deregulation and informality inspired policies regulating urban growth and the economic development of entire regions (Giannakourou, 2005). Second, demographic dynamics were found relatively homogeneous over time and space being characterized by distinct phases of fast and slow population increase (Salvati, Zitti, & Sateriano, 2013). Third, a complex system of interacting agents with local specificities was at the base of cities’ expansion, often irrespective of land prices and zoning processes (Salvati & Gargiulo Morelli, 2014).

How discussing the case for Rome, a southern European capital city, may contribute to the international debate on urban competitiveness and regional planning in ‘non-global’ cities is the central issue of the present article. Such an approach may provide hints to investigate the role of strategies promoting competitiveness in non-global (e.g. ‘ordinary’ *sensu* Amin & Graham, 1997) cities. Starting from the recent contributions by Allegretti and Cellamare (2008), Munafò, Norero, Sabbi, and Salvati (2010), De Muro et al. (2011), Gemmiti and Celant (2011) and Gemmiti et al. (2012), this paper debates on strengths and weaknesses of Rome’s governance in the light of its peculiar morphology and economic structure. The planning strategy for Rome, seen as a contrasting policy mix ranging between Mediterranean *laissez faire* practices and an ‘European polycentric view’ better attained for north-western urban regions, was finally discussed.

2. Urban expansion *in-between* ‘global’ perspectives and ‘ordinary’ scales

Globalization and economic development based on information and communication technologies have added to the concepts of hierarchy and spatial concentration, impacting urban agglomerations and inner scale economies (Harrison, 2007); the global city regions are thus candidate places for developing a mix of competitive advantages (Vanolo, 2008). Consequently, urban hierarchy and regional competitiveness have been increasingly interpreted

through the lens of the ‘global city region’ concept (Jonas & Ward, 2007; Neuman & Hull, 2009; Ward & Jonas, 2004).

With the emergence of ‘global cities’, a change in the urban paradigms arose since the 1980s. The ability to dominate the expanding economic system was depending on financial and social capitals generated in (and attracted by) each city. Large urban poles have begun to play the role of coordination nodes of supra-national entrepreneurial networks (Sassen, 1991). The ‘global’ cities became nodes capable to (re)orient the national and (sometimes) the international economy (Scott, 2001a) influencing, at the same time, the social and cultural networks becoming progressively more globalized (Hall, 2009). Forming a network of local economies capable to develop and maintain relevant functions, these cities concentrated command and control functions, financial and production services, hosting at the same time cultural and creative industries and attracting an increasing proportion of tourism flows (Hall & Pain, 2006; Scott, 2001b).

The profile of top-ranking city regions has diverged progressively with the one observed in the traditional Fordist cities. On the one hand, global cities’ functions have opened to a wide range of sectors and productions (Celant, 2007). On the other hand, these cities underwent visible transformations toward polycentrism, with impact on firms attractiveness and the economic potential (Davoudi, 2003, 2008; McCann, 2007; Rodriguez-Pose, 2008). Polycentric regions are also characterized by an active cooperation between sub-centers (Krueger & Savage, 2007), being usually involved in a network of relations based on local specialization, socioeconomic attributes and cultural identity (Deas & Giordano, 2003; Etherington & Jones, 2009; Neuman & Hull, 2009). These assumptions contrast with the characteristics of several Mediterranean cities described above. In most of southern European cities, expansion processes reflect informality, spontaneous urbanization and planning deregulation producing a socially and economically-fragmented landscape with a spatial organization hardly classifiable as ‘polycentric’ (Bayona-Carrasco & Gil-Alonso, 2012; De Muro et al., 2011; Maloutas, 2007; Violante, 2008).

3. Rome, thirty years on: the growth of a Mediterranean city

Although economic performances and the strength of internal relations have been often considered, relational criteria seem to be more suited to analyze the global cities’ hierarchy. Rome ranked relatively low in city-ranking exercises assessing urban assets (e.g. Sassen, 1991; Scott, 2001a,b) or evaluating relationships between production nodes (e.g. Hall & Pain, 2006; Taylor, 2004). Studies assessing urban competitiveness using performance indicators corroborated these results (e.g. Turok & Mykhnenko, 2007). Rome ranked lower than expected also in the European urban hierarchy (Beavenstock, Taylor, & Smith, 1999; Taylor, Catalano, & Walker, 2002b; Taylor et al., 2002a; OECD, 2006).

Studies (Taylor, 2004; Taylor et al., 2002a,b) carried out by Loughborough Globalization and World Cities Group (GAEC) classified Rome as a ‘Beta World City’ for both 2000 and 2012. Based on the original definition (for more details, see the web site of GAEC at <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/gawcworlds.html>), Beta World Cities form a class of cities that are instrumental in linking their region or state into the world economy. These cities can be seen as ‘sub-global cities’ with stable population and performances based on some ‘global’ services (e.g. banking, fashion, culture, media) capable to influence the regional economic system. However, the density of economic centers with supra-regional links is traditionally low in Rome, and the city declined as a command and control center during 2006–2011 (Csomós & Derudder, 2014). The competitiveness report elaborated by OECD (2006) ranked Rome 20th for

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