



## The Fordist city and the creative city: Evolution and resilience in Turin, Italy



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### ABSTRACT

Turin is an industrial city which has been a key site for Italian industrialisation in the past century, particularly because of the presence of FIAT car manufacturing. Turin is regarded as the archetypical Italian Fordist city, but as a consequence of the gradual crisis of Fordism, local institutions started diversifying the city's economic basis, particularly in the last decade, by embracing a culture-led approach to urban regeneration. The article analyses the evolution of Turin from Fordism, drawing on the concept of resilience. Specifically, the analysis will support two arguments. First, by focusing on the evolutionary patterns of alternative segments of the socio-economic base of the city, it is possible to detect synergies between the variety of local economic cultures and practices, on the one hand, and the capability of coping with shocks and transformations, which is basically resilience, on the other hand. Secondly, emphasising a multi-equilibrium perspective, it is possible to argue that apparently contrasting urban typologies, such as the 'Fordist city' and the 'creative city', have a hybridising potential, producing mixed forms of industrial-cultural cities as a result of the interaction between creativity and path-dependent growth.

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### Introduction

The concept of resilience, intended as the capability to resist or to adapt to shocks, stresses and pressures of different kinds, has been widely applied in urban studies. The aim of this paper is to propose some theoretical reflections focusing on the linkages between resilience, an urban economic base and culture. Since the city is a highly complex socio-economic, cultural and political system, there are a number of potential and non-linear relations between these three elements. Drawing on a specific case study, i.e., the city of Turin, Italy, this paper illustrates some potential synergic connections between socio-economic resilience and the variety of diverse economies and alternative economic cultures circulating in a city. This thesis is built on the analysis of the transition of Turin from Fordism to a hybrid industrial/cultural economic base, and to the effects and reactions in the framework of the current situation of economic crisis.

The paper is organised as follows. The first section introduces the concept of resilience and its potential understandings in the fields of urban and regional studies. The following section presents the evolutionary dynamics of Turin from Fordism to the current

economic crisis. Then an analysis of the evolutionary path of the city is produced through the mobilisation of the concept of resilience, with a specific examination of the role of local cultural assets and heritages as elements favouring the resilience of the urban economic base. Finally, the concluding section discusses potential theoretical problems and suggests synergies between cultural variety and socio-economic resilience.

### Resilience and the city

The concept of resilience is well known in a number of scientific fields, including physics (applied in engineering and construction, for example) and ecological studies. Although there is not only one definition, in an intuitive way resilience is basically understood as the buffer capacity or the ability of an element (for example, a material or an ecosystem) to absorb perturbations (for example, by deforming elastically), or the magnitude of disturbance that can be absorbed before a radical change in its structure (for example before reaching deformation, in the case of a material, or collapse, in the case of a building). In the last two decades, the idea of resilience has been translated into a number of human and social sciences, including psychology, organisational studies and network studies. Urban studies have been exposed to this contamination too, and resilience is today a popular keyword in the analysis of

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cities and regions (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013). Resilience may be therefore intended as the ability of a spatial system to absorb disturbance without metamorphosing into another state or phase (Gunderson, 2000). According to McClade et al. (2006), all socio-economic systems that can be seen to persist – particularly over long periods – can be described as being characteristically resilient, in the sense that they are able to incorporate change and perturbation without collapsing. This ability to absorb changing circumstances as defined by environmental, social, political or cultural fluctuations is itself a function both of the flexibility of structural organisation and system history. In fact, analyses of the capacity to adapt to change must be framed within an understanding of cultural values, historical context and the ethical standpoints of the kinds of actors involved (Cote & Nightingale, 2013).

In urban studies, the concept of resilience has been mostly applied with reference to the capability to recover from 'natural' disasters as earthquakes, floods or wars (Stehr, 2006; Vale & Campanella, 2005). But the concept of disaster includes many other critical events, such as economic crises. A recent critical field of research is mobilising resilience in order to understand, interpret and describe wider transformations in urban and regional systems. This is basically a new field of research: it is probably no coincidence that popular encyclopaedias such as Hutchinson's *Encyclopedia of Urban Studies* (Hutchinson, 2010), Gregory et al.'s *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (Gregory, Johnston, Pratt, Watts, & Whatmore, 2009) and Kitchin and Thrift's *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Kitchin & Thrift, 2009) do not include resilience as a specific entry. On the other hand, a number of authors have used resilience as a key concept in their analysis of regional economics: this is the case, among others, of Simmie and Martin (2010), Pike, Dawley, and Tomaney (2010), Hassink (2010), and Cooke and Eriksson (2012). The mobilisation of resilience in regional studies is not simple: while resilience in ecological studies is often intended as the capability of returning to a pre-existing stable or equilibrium state, in regional economies it may be positive to move quickly to a new state. This may be the case of a regional system coping with an economic crisis by quickly changing its economic basis, for example by moving to a different economic specialisation. For this reason, Simmie and Martin (2010) distinguish between two interpretations: on the one hand, resilience may be closer to the notion of 'elasticity', that is, the ability to absorb and accommodate perturbation without experiencing major structural transformation; on the other hand, shocks may cause a system to move into another regime of behaviour, linking resilience with adaptability (Lazzeretti, 2013). In this sense, it is useful to think of resilience as an evolutionary concept, that is, the differential ability of a region to adapt to changes in competitive, market, technological, policy and related conditions that shape the evolutionary dynamics and trajectories of that local economy over time. In addition, resilience is most often used in connection with sudden shocks, but in the case of regional economies many shocks present their effects quite slowly, as in the case of deindustrialisation, a problem strongly connected to the case study analysed in this paper.

### Turin: from the service sector to industrial specialisation, and back

Turin is a Northwestern Italian city, with a population in 2013 of about 900,000 inhabitants in the municipality, and 1.7 million people in the metropolitan area.<sup>1</sup> It is the capital of the Piedmont

region (4.5 million inhabitants), and the fourth Italian city in terms of population.

With a high degree of generalisation, Turin's evolution in the last century has been quite similar to that of other major urban areas in Europe whose growth has been connected to industrialisation and immigration. Differently from other cities who experienced industrialisation by the end of XIX century, industrial growth in Turin was quite slow until the First World War, and then extremely fast with the growth of FIAT car manufacturing and the consequent growth of a system of small and medium enterprises working as suppliers for FIAT.

The economic hyper-specialisation of Turin did not start with car manufacturing. Being a national capital up to 1865,<sup>2</sup> the city was highly specialised in the service sector, and then with industrialisation it turned into a productive centre, compared by Mumford (1938) with cities such as Pittsburgh, Lyon and Essen. While at the end of the XIX century a number of car manufacturers and industrial enterprises were located within the city, in the XX century the history of Turin was mostly connected to FIAT (Gabert, 1964). The demographic growth of the city during the century, in fact, was driven by immigration of people willing to work in FIAT from Eastern and Southern Italy, and at the beginning of the 1970s about 80% of industrial workers were involved in car manufacturing.

Putting it briefly, Turin might be considered a typical factory-town: it is no coincidence that it has been often considered as the Italian equivalent of Detroit (Pizzolato, 2008), as both cities grew up thanks to a deep specialisation in the car manufacturing industry. In the case of Turin, the tight form of control imposed by FIAT over local suppliers – including financial control – made the concentration of capital even higher than the economic specialisation (Spriano, 1985), producing a kind of symbiotic relation between the city and FIAT: a 'total embedding' where the spatial, institutional and cultural developments of the city and the firm were highly interconnected (Grabher, 1993).

During the 1970s, the local economic shock connected to the beginning of the Fordist crisis determined both an internal reorganisation of FIAT and a rescaling of industrial relations, with relocalisation of plants both at the national (particularly in Southern Italy) and international levels (Latin America and Eastern Europe). These transformations had visible consequences on Turin: population growth stopped, and employment in the service sector started to rise. The city was clearly still industrial, but industrial relations and productive chains were no longer limited to the metropolitan area: Turin was just part of a wider productive system. Former location factors and sources of external economies became, of a sudden, problems and diseconomies, as in the case of the diffuse presence of an unskilled workforce, no longer useful for the industrial sector, and the abundance of small and medium enterprises working as FIAT suppliers, as these SMEs were often unable to cope with technological and market innovations. The introduction of new productive processes, based on automation technologies, led in fact to a decrease of 38,000 workers between 1980 and 1982, while during the 1980s a large number of local suppliers disappeared from the market due to failure or to processes of merging/acquisition.

The crisis of the 1980s was just the beginning of the deterioration of the car manufacturing industrial system: during the 1990s the situation became critical, reaching a nadir in 2002 (Whitford & Enrietti, 2005). A number of reasons, including unwise business strategies on FIAT's part, led to a severe crisis, and in 2002 FIAT

<sup>1</sup> Data source (if an alternative source is not explicitly mentioned) is always *Piemonte in Cifre 2014*; <http://www.piemonteincifre.it> (accessed 25 November 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Turin has been the capital of the Duchy of Savoy from 1563, of the Kingdom of Sardinia from 1714 to 1720, of Italy from 1861 to 1865.

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