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Viewpoint

Beyond a 'side street story'? Naples from spontaneous centrality to entropic polycentricism, towards a 'crisis city'

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ABSTRACT

Recent urbanization trends in the Mediterranean region have stimulated a debate on the relationship between the form and the functions of cities, in turn revealing a relatively high degree of urban sustainability and resilience to external shocks. Beginning with compact and dense forms, over the last thirty years Mediterranean cities have undergone a path of scattered expansion. This process reflects, in many cases, deregulated urban growth rather than decentralization processes driven by planning strategies aiming at polycentrism. Economic recession in southern European countries has influenced these patterns considerably by reducing competitiveness and depressing the economic performance of entire urban systems. An interpretive key to investigating the new forms of urban expansion in Mediterranean Europe is proposed here by introducing the 'crisis city' archetype, discussed in the light of the post-war development path of Naples, Italy. The complexity of the territorial processes that drive urban expansion and changes was analysed, focusing on the socio-spatial structure, economic configuration and entropic morphologies that qualify Naples as the exemplification of a 'crisis city'. Spontaneity, planning deregulation, criminality, and the informal economy—all found in Naples—are symptoms of a 'locked' system, incapable of progressing towards mature urban models. Abandoning the traditional monocentric frame vividly represented in the 1950 movie *Napoli milionaria* (released in English as 'Side Street Story'), the consolidation of a scattered and entropic morphology *in between* compactness and dispersion reflects a development deficit that depresses the competitiveness potential of the city. We interpreted the transition of Naples in the light of a 'Mediterranean continuum' in which a locked and informal model, far from both wealthier western European cities and more mature southern alternatives, limits urban competitiveness.

1. Introduction

Mediterranean cities have undergone huge transformations in the last thirty years, mainly from traditional compact models to discontinuous and dispersed morphologies (Kasanko, Barredo, & Lavalle, 2006; Longhi & Musolesi, 2007; Schneider & Woodcock, 2008). This change was accompanied by the rapid—and sometimes disordered—development of rural land on the fringes of large cities (Salvati, Gargiulo Morelli, & Rontos, 2013). At the same time, the decline of the urban core—a latent change in the economic functions of the consolidated city (Hall, 1997a)—and the emergence of new satellite cities ('sub-centres') was explained by the birth of a polycentric spatial asset (Bruegmann, 2005). This development pattern related to the emergence of a plurality of urban centres improves the economic performance of the entire region and reduces the disparities caused by the concentration of population and activities in the city core (Meijers & Sandberg, 2008).

According to Kloosterman and Musterd (2001), "polycentrism, basically denoting the existence of multiple centres in one area, seems to have become one of the defining characteristics of the urban landscape in advanced economies". Thus polycentrism has become one of the keys for interpreting new urban geographies. Empirical evidence shows that this model has been repeated in a number of cities in both the United States and Europe (Hall & Pain, 2006); in this way polycentrism has become a central argument when explaining the structural change of urban regions. However, despite the general interest in the issue, the transition from the monocentric compact city to more dispersed (and possibly polycentric) models is relatively poorly documented in southern Europe (Dura-Guimera, 2003; Giannakourou, 2005; Catalàn, Sauri, & Serra, 2008). In fact currently evolving complex urban systems are progressively abandoning their 'compact tradition' and are organizing spontaneously or entropically, driven by planning deregulation, inaction or even austerity urbanism (Chorianopoulos, Pagonis, Koukoulas, & Drymoniti, 2010; Souliotis, 2013; Salvati & Gargiulo Morelli, 2014; Salvati, Sateriano, & Grigoriadis, 2015). This article contributes to and expands the discourse about uneven development in southern European urban spaces.

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Mediterranean cities have undergone important and contradictory transformations: examples can be found in Dura-Guimera (2003) and Muñoz (2003) for Barcelona; Mudu (2006); De Muro, Monni, and Tridico (2011); Clough Marinaro and Thomassen (2014) and Salvati (2014) for Rome; Maloutas (2007); Arapoglou and Sayas (2009); Chorianopoulos et al. (2010); Tsilimpounidi (2012); Souliotis (2013) and Vradis (2014) for Athens; Terzi and Bolen (2009) for Istanbul. Similar changes have affected other cities in the Mediterranean region (Minca, 2004). Naples, a relatively large urban area which exemplifies the 'Mediterranean city archetype' introduced by Leontidou (1990) — but probably less known in the international urban studies arena — is the subject of this article.

While being a compact city and dispersed, with considerable differences of class, culture and demography, Naples has within the social and economic contradictions typical of the Mediterranean city so vividly represented by Leontidou (1993, 1995, 1996): a city whose spatial organization is only partially informal, but whose planning has always been fascinated by deregulation and inaction; an economy potentially active with attractive sectors and producing a reasonable level of income, but also widespread poverty; a city victim of a crisis that comes from afar, with evident and latent criminality, which faces increasing difficulties with the current recession (Allum, 1973; Rossi, 2003a; Mazzeo, 2009). Recent development in Naples gives an insight into the complex interplay between the territorial, social and economic factors that jointly influence urban structure and functions (Rosi, 2004). For this reason, it appears instructive to study this particular kind of urban landscape, in which all variables are profoundly linked to each other, with relationships that are hard to read and to interpret (Viganoni, 2007). Going beyond the 'Mediterranean city' archetype, the development of Naples exemplifies the difficult transition of many southern European cities into a new urban arrangement, involving many different aspects, including urban structure, planning, social attributes, cultural aspects and economic factors (Rossi, 2003b). Naples' recent history adds to the analysis of socioeconomic transformations in large Mediterranean cities, with spontaneity and informality embedded in the city's roots and the lack of structural readjustments during the crisis (Tsilimpounidi, 2012; Leontidou, 2014; Vradis, 2014).

This approach contributes to the debate around recent growth paths and models for 'non-global' cities. This article demonstrates that an articulated urban context—combining historical complexities: post-war deregulated expansion with the addition of the recent economic crisis—cannot be interpreted using purely polycentric approaches or traditional core–periphery models (Leontidou, 1993), e.g., based on the land rent gradient. As Leontidou (1996) suggests, place-specific theories and narratives will contribute to the understanding of "geographical, socioeconomic and cultural in-between spaces that cannot be conceptualized within the core/periphery, development/underdevelopment, dichotomies of political economy or the urban/rural, modern/post-modern bipolarities of urban theory". In turn, Souliotis (2013) argues that "there is a need to more systematically take into account local and national contexts within which cultural economy and policies are embedded".

Pursuing this intriguing perspective, our article interprets recent urban development in the northern Mediterranean region, adopting Naples as a paradigm for cities enduring one of the worst periods of their history: buffeted by political instability, economic backwardness, consolidated social disparities, and the recession. The present condition is a summary of relevant factors entering the debate on the supposed 'late modernity' of the Mediterranean (Kourliouros, 2003; Minca, 2003; Rossi, 2004a; Giaccaria & Minca, 2011). In a discourse about the 'Mediterranean crisis', with southern European cities being progressively excluded from the geopolitical issue, we will discuss the transformation of the urban form vis à vis emerging changes in economic functions. The traditional compact form in search of a polycentric alternative is the protagonist of our journey through the recent development of Naples.

2. Introducing the 'crisis city'

Paradigms such as 'global cities', 'ordinary cities', 'creative cities', 'smart cities', or the latest moniker, 'flexible cities', have widely been used to describe vastly different urban contexts (e.g. Hall, 1997b; Scott, 2011; Florida, 2004). By introducing the concept of 'global cities', Sassen (1991) opens up the debate on urban competitiveness, control-and-command regions, global markets, and international exchanges shaping the world hierarchy of cities. It is argued that cities that act as the centre of transnational business are in a predominant position to manage international flows, becoming key nodes of the global economy (Scott, 2011). Cities that are unable to attract higher economic functions have been often interpreted as 'ordinary cities' (Amin & Graham, 1997). Without attributing a negative meaning to this concept, ordinary cities thrive on more basic functions, allowing them to achieve an intermediate position in global dynamic which simultaneously assures them a participatory role on a regional scale. Based on complex, adaptive and hetero-organized development, the 'flexible' city is a paradigm that promotes cities as a place of change; urban contexts are facing new challenges and flexible cities are places where policy makers and citizens are an active engine for rapid changes that improve the city's condition and allow it to adapt to future challenges (Amin & Thrift, 2002). General exemplars, however, may hardly describe precise territorial contexts—in the context of thousands of years of history—that necessarily deviate significantly from theoretical assumptions. Such spaces, when interpreted using stereotypes or models that are not related to place-specific contexts, can be 'lost in complexity' (Leontidou, 1995).

While referring to a sometimes general idea of deregulation (e.g., in planning), *laissez-faire* and/or inaction policies, settlement spontaneity, non-regular or undeclared jobs, the concept of 'informality' used in the present paper reflects what stems from the late-1990s/early-2000s literature on the 'Mediterranean city' (Leontidou, 1995; Kourliouros, 2003; Minca, 2003; Maloutas, 2007), echoed sometimes in the most recent studies on the recession's impact on societies and local economic systems (Tsilimpounidi, 2012; Souliotis, 2013; Vradis, 2014). Informality is a (more or less) recognized trait of Mediterranean societies (Leontidou, 1996) sometimes permeating house and job markets, local culture and institutions (Giaccaria & Minca, 2011), and producing latent corruption or minor episodes of illegality, semi-squatting practices, but also social movements, contested spaces, cooperatives, urban gardening and other experiences of social resistance and re-appropriation of 'common' *lieux* (e.g. Leontidou, 2014).

The attempt of this paper is to introduce the 'crisis city' framework to interpret those realities, of which Mediterranean cities—especially Naples—are an example. The 'crisis city' is a condition traceable in specific and entropic systems where a linear definition of urban landscapes and functions is barely formulated (Fig. 1). Indeed interpreting the intimate complexity of those systems is complicated by a wealth of interlinked factors. Scholars of Mediterranean cities, as described by Leontidou (1990), may find in the 'crisis city' paradigm the key to understanding both recent changes and consolidated urban realities.

In a 'crisis city', individual aims emerge as stronger than collective well-being and economic agents, driving urban structures into disorganized structures that lack collective perspectives or participative governance (Le Galès, 1998; King, De Mas, & Beck, 2001; Giannakourou, 2005). Social forces are part of this system, based on adaptation, grassroots creativity, spontaneity and informality. There are two ways of looking at the informal economy: a negative exception linked to the black economy, illegality, organized crime, the *Camorra*, and a positive interpretation that is reflected in informal jobs, self-employed artisans, and family entrepreneurs, often representing resilient survivors of economic shocks. Both aspects influence urban dynamics and contribute to the spatial organization of the city. A fundamental consequence is that the urban landscape looks irregular and ambiguous: an ambiguity that may be read through diverse urban 'faces' that only rarely reflect classical socioeconomic gradients (Talia, 1998).