

LE REGIONI D'EUROPA TRA IDENTITÀ LOCALI, NUOVE COMUNITÀ E DISPARITÀ TERRITORIALI

**The regions of Europe among local identities,
new communities and territorial disparities**

a cura di

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The debated nature of territorial interests in urban areas: insights from a monographic study

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Abstract

In metropolitan regions, there are different senses of belonging, different strategic practices, and different economic and institutional structures: how do they relate to one another? Is it possible to demonstrate a relatively stable connection between local actors' strategies, on the one hand, and politico-territorial structural contexts, on the other? These are the main research questions addressed in the research summarized here, which were studied through the lens of the Milan empirical case.

The concept of proximity was the main research object of the research. By this term, I refer to the socio-spatial configuration of local actors which organizes regular patterns of interaction. The research argued that the (changing) relationship between institutional forms and territorial interdependence matters to metropolitan region's local actors such as Mayors, trade unions, entrepreneurial associations, and active citizenship networks. The degree to which these actors feel involved and intentionally engage to transform proximity was studied through the existence of documentable initiatives (as reported by the respective leaderships), which I define "territorial strategies".

In the term "strategy" I include a broad range of actions, including actual territorial strategic projects and plans, but not limited to these: political negotiations, deployment of financial resources, enhancement of specific "cultures of the metropolis" (Lefèvre et al., 2013) are all forms of spatially-sensitive intentional action at metropolitan scale. The criteria used in this research to define the approach of a local actor as "strategic" are: the fact that the actions carried out are intentional; the integration of a medium- to long-term time horizon; and the existence of a prior assessment of ongoing changes in the actor's environment. I took into consideration actions of various form that have a spatial/territorial articulation. Therefore, the projects, initiatives, or single choices that I defined as "strategic" may or may not take the form of an explicit urban/territorial project. I documented how local actors enact territorial strategies to modify their regular patterns of interaction at metropolitan scale.

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2. Methodology

My argument was initially inspired by the contributions that stressed the importance of institutional forms and territorial interdependence. The title of the book by Antonio Calafati, *Economie in cerca di città* (“Economies searching for cities”), offers the possibility to explain what the main assumptions and implications of these contributions are. On the one hand there are (territorial) economies, that is concentrations of socio-spatial proximity; on the other hand there aren’t simply cities, but *civitates*, forms of political integration. The assumptions are that institutions are a relatively rational entity, that territorial interdependence can be empirically approximated, and that the role of politics as a technique of negotiation and compromise is not crucial. The implication is that *territorial interests are fundamentally conceived as an objective element, deriving from territorial interdependence.*

The theoretical clarity of this approach offered an important alternative to other contributions on the metropolitan question by urban planners, which appeared to be characterized by a strong epistemological relativism (Boeri *et al.*, 1993; Palermo, 1997; Ischia, 1999; Lanzani, 2005). Such epistemological openness incentivized a certain hybridization of scientific approaches and disciplinary boundaries, and offered a fertile ground to innovate the relationship between planners and political-administrative initiatives (Balducci *et al.*, 2011).

However, these contributions overtly refused to deal with empirical approximations of territorial interdependence, including the geography of labor market areas periodically updated by Italy’s statistical Institute, ISTAT, because they were regarded as an over-simplification of complex territorial dynamics. This validated a certain underestimation of the heuristic power of functional methodologies. It must be stressed that the methodology developed by ISTAT was in connection with the research program on “Third Italy”. and “industrial districts” (Bagnasco, 1977; Becattini, 1987), which explored innovative forms of socio-economic-territorial development and resonated in international scientific literature. It appears that the heritage of this research program was split between the applied research tool, used by regional economists (Martellato, Sforzi, 1990), and the sociological elaborations of Bagnasco, mobilized by urbanists (Lanzani, 1996).

Calafati (2009) has argued that it is surprising that the research program on industrial districts did not take up the “urban question” of Italy. This argument is corroborated by the observation that Bagnasco himself engaged in the direction of urban sociology (Bagnasco, Le Galès, 1997). This direction proved to be a fertile research field, taken up by new research programs in urban political economy (Tosi, Vitale, 2011), and recently reinvigorated by Bagnasco (2015) himself.

However, what matters to the argument of this research are the assumptions and implications of the contributions to the metropolitan question by the school of thought promoted by urban planners mentioned above. The title of recent works by Alessandro Balducci offer the possibility to reflect upon these contributions: *Urban planning as a trading zone; Strategic planning as the intentional production of a "Trading Zone"*. The Author implies that both institutional forms as rational entities and territorial interdependence as empirical approximations have lost heuristic power. He stresses instead the transformative capacities of politics to provide actors with shared settings and elaborate paths through conflicting interests. The implication is that *territorial interests are fundamentally conceived as a subjective element, which exist only if there exist actors claiming them*.

My hypothesis stated that socio-political actors of functional urban regions adopted a metropolitan geographical scale in the enactment of their strategies. The demonstration of the hypothesis consisted in one main operation: keeping the (metropolitan) geographical scale fixed and identifying and analyzing the connection between "hard factors" and "soft forces" (Molotch, 2002), relating to territory and institutions on the one hand and to society and politics on the other hand. In fact, the idea that even a metropolitan region could represent a setting for "place-making" (in an anthropological sense) was attuned with other contributions in urban and regional studies which underscored the relevance of "elusive", place-related factors in the explanation of even very "tangible" outcomes such as specific models of industrial products (ibidem).

That hypothesis was also in accordance with Authors who stressed the importance of informal relationships among local groups for the possibility to maintain the productive specialization of a locality in the long run. A seemingly "futile" or fleeting factor, like informal relationships, is so put at the core of our capacity to understand one of the central research questions of economic geography, the "where" of development (Storper, 2013: chapter 6).

3. Findings

I therefore came to articulate the structural metropolitan context as a combination of: varying degrees and multiple centralities of territorial interdependence, an existing institutional framework of governance, and a consolidated landscape of institutional bifurcations. The empirical analysis was devoted to describing and interpreting the conceptions and practices of social, political, economic, and cultural actors operating at a metropolitan scale, and finally to articulating the two dimensions of "structural metropolitan context" and "territorial strategies".

My interpretation of the findings based on the empirical research is that territorial strategies and political interpretations are *coherent* with the degree of integration with the functional metropolitan core, and with the characteristics of intermediate territorial institutions. Therefore I argue that territorial interests became visible only when an actor was there to claim them; however, I also add that territorial interests are conceivable as an objective element, because they can be understood *also, but not only* through theoretical expectations based on empirical approximations. Empirical evidence on third sector actors is important in this sense, because it showed how the issue of *the metropolis as a socio-political form* is being taken up also by actors that do not directly defend economic interests. It shows in other words that there are actors in Milan that conceive of the metropolitan region as a “place”, as an emerging form of citizenship, regardless of specific collective interests.

My research brings two main contributions to the debate on the nature of territorial interests in urban areas. The first one is to show how metropolitan institutions have been subject to political use by political actors. The examination of an important case, like that of Milan, in a historical perspective, allowed me to highlight these processes, which were defined as “hidden faces of institutional change” (Hacker *et al.*, 2015). This points to the importance of political interpretations of institutional forms as a research object, and to the role of politics as a technique of negotiation and compromise to understand processes of construction of territorial interests. The second contribution is to show how metropolitan actors do follow certain types of rationalities in their strategic response to environmental changes. The empirical fieldwork carried out in metropolitan Milan allowed me to highlight that the “metropolitan continuum” is populated with very proactive and competent societal actors that enact territorial strategies in order to *transform proximity* in specific territories, which do not correspond to the metropolitan core. This points to the importance of territorial development strategies as a research object, and to the importance of empirical approximations of territorial interdependence to understand processes of construction of territorial interests.

In this wedge between what can be expected by looking at structural elements and what depends on the autonomous initiative of local actors, lies the articulation between objective and subjective nature of territorial interests. Using a metaphor, the autonomous initiative of local actors is to metropolitan development what the “last mile” is to logistics: a small but indispensable part to determine the overall outcome.

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Sulla natura degli interessi territoriali nelle aree urbane: spunti da uno studio monografico

Sommario

In questo contributo si presentano i principali aspetti concettuali e metodologici di una ricerca sul rapporto tra sensi di appartenenza, pratiche strategiche e strutture economiche e istituzionali nelle regioni metropolitane, attraverso uno studio empirico del caso di Milano. Analizzando specifiche “strategie territoriali” messe in atto da attori locali a scala metropolitana, la ricerca si misura con diverse tradizioni di pensiero nell’ambito degli studi urbani italiani in merito alla natura degli interessi territoriali nelle aree urbane. Da una parte, una concezione che sottolinea la natura “oggettiva” degli interessi territoriali, come un fatto derivante dalle forme misurabili di interdipendenza socio-economica che caratterizzano lo spazio urbano. Dall’altra parte, una concezione più “soggettiva” degli interessi territoriali, come un campo in cui la pluralità di attori coinvolti nella governance urbana può costruire significati condivisi e perseguire strategie comuni. La ricerca ha evidenziato i modi in cui le “strategie territoriali” messe in atto dagli attori locali nella metropoli milanese sono vincolate dalle forme economiche e istituzionali di strutturazione del territorio; senza derivare da tale risultato una concezione strettamente deterministica degli interessi territoriali, nella misura in cui alcuni attori locali della metropoli milanese cercano di interpretare tali vincoli come un’opportunità per rimodellare i propri scambi ricorrenti e le proprie relazioni con altri soggetti nella regione metropolitana.