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Post-Metropolitan Territories

Looking for a New Urbanity

Edited by
Alessandro Balducci, Valeria Fedeli and
Francesco Curci



Post-Metropolitan Territories

Processes of multi-scalar regional urbanization are occurring worldwide. Such processes are clearly distinguishable from those of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to the shifting concepts of both the city and the metropolis. International literature highlights how what we have historically associated with the idea of cities has long been subjected to consistent reconfiguration, which involves stressing some of the typical features of the idea of “cityness”.

Post-Metropolitan Territories: Looking for a New Urbanity is the product of a research project funded by the Italian Ministry for Education, Universities and Research (MIUR). It constitutes a thorough overview of a country that is one of Europe’s most diverse in terms of regional development and performance: Italy. This book brings together case studies of a number of Italian cities and their hinterlands and looks at new forms of urbanization, exploring themes of sustainability, industrialization, de-industrialization, governance, city planning and quality of life.

This volume will be of great interest to academics and students who study regional development, economic geography and urban studies, as well as civil servants and policymakers in the field of spatial planning, urban policy, territorial policies and governance.

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This book is dedicated to Daniele Pennati, post-doctoral fellow in urban planning and active member of our research team who, thanks to his exceptional knowledge in web design, has been the designer of our atlas of post-metropolitan territories, the instrument around which we have developed our research project.

Daniele had the extraordinary capacity of making complex problems understandable, and for us his dramatic death, with the sudden interruption of his young life, has been a great loss, completely incomprehensible.



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PART I

Building an atlas of post-metropolitan Italy



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1 Post-metropolitan territories as emergent forms of urban space

*Alessandro Balducci, Valeria Fedeli and
Francesco Curci*

Post-metropolis: an inspiring conceptualization

Processes of multi-scalar regional urbanization are occurring worldwide, with characteristics that clearly distinguish them from those studied by nineteenth- and twentieth-century urban studies through the traditional concepts of both the city first and the metropolis later. International literature highlights how all that we have historically associated with the idea of cities has long been subjected to a consistent reconfiguration, which involves and stresses some of the typical features of the idea of “cityness” (Sennett, 2007) – in other words, what we consider the typical urban characteristics to be, what makes the city a specific phenomenon that can be distinguished from other forms of social life. Size, density and heterogeneity were accounted for by Wirth and the Chicago school as the distinctive characteristics of “the urban”¹ (Dematteis & Lanza, 2011); the processes that have occurred since the end of the twentieth century in Europe and in the United States have produced relevant challenges to these features. So far, literature has focused its attention on the description of the new forms and size of the city, elaborating a large amount of new terms to describe its new characteristics: conurbations, (global) city-regions, megalopolis, megacities, polycentric regions (Geddes, 1915; Gottmann, 1957; Borja et al., 1997; Sassen, 2001; Florida, 2006; Hall & Pain, 2006; Florida et al., 2008; Scott, 2011), and so on. At the same time, the international debate has also shown that, together with their size and form, the nature and identity of cities are being profoundly modified. In the European context, in particular, some historical characteristics seem to be at stake (Le Galès, 2002, 2006, 2011, 2015) – social heterogeneity, political autonomy and governmental asset, roles and functions, lifestyles and landscapes, political orientation – so much so that, on the one hand, urban multiplication and diffusion become categories no longer clear and significant (Amin & Thrift, 2005), while on the other, in the face of *planetary urbanization* (Brenner, 2014), the city appears to be just one of the forms of the contemporary urban condition. In this respect, the city has become, for scholars, politicians and policymakers, an ambiguous object (Martinotti, 1999), the description (and government) of which is particularly complex because it has become more and more difficult to isolate the contemporary urban fabric in terms of a stable and definitive socio-spatial fact that is clearly distinguishable from the non-urban realm.

For many years, these kinds of processes have been interpreted in terms of decentralization, dispersion or even disloyalty to the constituent characteristics of the historical city, reproducing an interpretative model typical of the nineteenth century, counterposing the center to the periphery, concentration to dispersion, homogeneity to heterogeneity, proximity to distance. In this sense, according to several scholars, including Edward Soja, much of the literature that initially came to terms with the so-called new urban dimension has not really renewed the vocabulary and the concept of the city (Soja, 2011). Even when trying to describe the new metropolitan condition, a great part of the literature has simply expanded the “city” framework for the interpretation and judgment of processes that could not be framed anymore with the same concepts (Soja, 2011). Not only images such as that of agglomeration and conurbation (the former being the result of the growth around the compact city, the latter the result of the welding of neighboring agglomerations), but also the same idea of metropolitan areas seems, in this respect, still based on the idea of a clearly identifiable relationship between the central city and its neighboring territories, or an area of influence of the central city.

Such traditional interpretations of urban change have been questioned by a number of authors who have proposed thinking, a decade from now, in new terms about the contemporary urban, looking at the unfolding processes of regional urbanization that are completely reshaping the urban, but also looking at size, density and heterogeneity (just to mention some of these new definitions: the “città infinita”, introduced by Bonomi & Abruzzese, 2004; the “open city”, proposed by Sennet, 2007; the “endless” city, discussed by Burdett & Sudjic, 2007). The American geographer Edward Soja – looking in particular at urban phenomena on the West Coast of the USA, but extending his exploration outside of the United States – proposed in 2011 focusing on new socio-spatial phenomena that seemed to have erased or fundamentally altered the relationship between urban and suburban as conceptualized, first, within an urban model, and then within a metropolitan one. In particular, he proposed exploring and dealing with “the emergence of a distinctive new urban form, the extensive polynucleated, densely networked, information-intensive and increasingly globalized city region [. . .], to a polycentric network of urban agglomerations, where relatively high densities are found throughout the urbanized region” (Soja, 2011, p. 684).

Three epiphenomena, according to Soja, could be detected and studied under the concept of “post-metropolis,” as reformulated by the author in 2011: (1) the flattening and shrinking of the gradient of urban density; (2) the progressive erosion of the boundary between urban and suburban; and (3) the homogenization of the urban landscape as well as an increasing differentiation and specialization of the suburban. Among the effects, Soja (2011) listed: (1) the disappearance of significant differences in lifestyles between urban and suburban, with the emergence of different (sub) urban ways of life; (2) the mixing of urban and suburban forms; (3) the combination of paradoxical forms of decentralization and recentralization, tied on the one hand to the expulsion of some urban functions in peri-urban contexts, capable of generating new centers and, on the other, to the shaping of new geographies in the suburban and the reverse; and (4) the emergence of a new urban form,

that of “polynucleated, densely networked, information-intensive, and increasingly globalized city region” (Soja, 2011, p. 684). In the post-metropolis conceptualized by Soja, the traditional density gradients from the center to the periphery get thinner; the boundaries between the city and the countryside fade away; peripheries become more and more differentiated and host strategic urban functions; decentralization and recentralization recombine and produce new sets of centralities and new systems of voids. These effects could express and configure not only a new urban form, but also a “new urban question” that reformulates, rather than simply amplifying some of the typical problems of the twentieth-century city, such as environmental degradation, social polarization, inequalities in the distribution of and access to resources. The new urban regional scale seems to behave like a constitutive element not only of spatial recomposition, but also social and economic processes. This element questions the idea of socio-spatial cohesion traditionally linked with the urban fact, and lets new destructuring and restructuring processes emerge, deserving new analysis, interpretation and policy approaches.

We came into this reconceptualization of post-metropolis in terms of regional urbanization on the occasion of a seminar organized in Paris by the City Councilor Pierre Mansat, the purpose of which was to discuss the challenges of metropolitan governance in the case of similar urban contexts (Paris Metropole, *Le défi de la gouvernance*, 2011). We found it to be an interesting and challenging hypothesis of research to use as a starting point, a few months later, when we initiated a research proposal to be submitted to the national call for research projects published by the Italian Ministry for Education, Universities and Research (MIUR). The discussion that took place in Paris with Edward Soja seemed promising and stimulating. Once back in Italy and looking for a challenging research framework to propose, we suggested to other colleagues in Italy to assume some of the questions that the discussion had generated in our minds.

Could Soja’s reasoning be assumed also to explore the Italian context? Were Italian cities facing the emergence of new complex and diverse forms of the urban, characterized by the above-mentioned processes? Could this interpretative framework allow us to unveil a new urbanization phase and, together with this, help us identify new forms of social inequalities, a more heterogeneous and divided city, characterized by new social differentiation or plagued by significant environmental problems as proposed by Soja? Alternatively, was the Italian case impossible to describe according to the hypothesis developed with reference to the USA context? Was there the need for a specific and peculiar interpretative framework?

In our minds there was also the idea that the last 20 years of research on regional urbanization in Italy had produced quite consistent results in terms of conceptualization of urban change (Boeri et al., 1993; Lanzani, 2003; Clementi et al., 1996; Secchi, 2005; Balducci & Fedeli, 2007; Balducci et al., 2008; Balducci et al., 2011), but with limited international resonance. Indeed, the Italian case could contribute to enriching the international debate, proposing possible alternative interpretations to international mainstreaming (Roy, 2009). Since the 1990s, the Italian debate has generously focused on the interpretation of the consistent processes of socio-spatial change occurring in some of the

largest urban areas in Italy. And since the 1960s, in fact, a series of important changes have affected some of the most lively urban contexts in Italy, attracting the attention of several urban scholars (among others, De Carlo, 1962; Samonà, 1959; Quaroni, 1967; Indovina et al., 1990; Boeri et al., 1993; Turri, 2000; Secchi, 2005; Perulli, 2012). In particular, some of the concepts introduced in the early 1960s – in a dialogue with the international debate, by authors such as Quaroni, Samonà and De Carlo, for example the *città-regione* (De Carlo, 1962) – to describe the first evident effects of urban regionalization in contexts such as the Milan urban region have been reused and adapted to discuss more recent processes that occurred during the late 1980s and early 1990s and which have been interpreted through the concept of *città diffusa* (Indovina et al., 1990). This umbrella term is used in different ways by different authors to describe the contradictions and potentialities, the threats and opportunities of a kind of urban development with new forms, size and meaning, both in more typical metropolitan conditions (the case of the Milan urban region) and in non-metropolitan ones (the Veneto region). In this respect the Italian debate has focused on the one hand on the contradictions and potentialities of a diffuse urbanization, altering the traditional reference to the city, and on the other on the proposal of new urban landscapes and lifestyles, which deserved not only appropriate descriptions but also design attention. In particular, a part of the debate has stigmatized the externalities of a “diffuse urbanization” and suggested the necessity to govern the “urban diffusion” (see in particular Indovina, 1990). This part of the literature has at the same time clarified that the diffuse city was different in nature from the concept of sprawl: the Italian diffuse city was a mixed-use city, not necessarily low density and not necessarily rich and suburban. The other part has tried to acknowledge the dignity of this new form of urbanity, looking at it as a positive planning challenge (see Lanzani, 2003; Secchi, 2005), and in particular trying to produce new analytical categories able to grasp the new settlement patterns but also with attention to the socio-economic dynamics that produce them. In the mid-2000s the exploration of large conurbations covering entire parts of the national territory – in particular along the Turin-Milan-Venice axis in terms of *città infinita* by Bonomi and Abruzzese (2004) – further contributed to developing the idea of a new urban dimension, which is not only infinite, because it is lacking in boundaries, but infinitely complex in all its components – meaning in this sense that the complexity of problems and opportunities offered by the traditional urban areas can be found even in apparently suburban or traditionally peripheral contexts. The historical polycentric nature of the Italian context and the conceptualization of the Third Italy in the economic sphere have further contributed to the debate, confirming the special attention to the richness of the urban structure on the one hand, and on the other focusing innovatively on the production of urban formations based on a peculiar interaction between a small and medium-sized manufacturing system and the historical urban grid in specific parts of the country (namely in the Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia Romagna, Toscana and Marche regions). In this respect, the idea of post-metropolis could appear only partially able to contribute to this articulated debate.

We also had a final urgency in our scholarly agenda: that of putting forward a research project that could, almost 20 years after one of the last systematic attempts in Italy to interpret socio-spatial change processes produced by an academic research project (Clementi et al., 1996), recognize and thematize the emergence of new and plural “urban forms”/“forms of urbanity” and contribute to supporting decision-makers and policymakers in shaping a more consistent urban agenda and new forms of urban governance. The frequentation of the international debate had in fact convinced us that a systematic exploration of the urban phenomenon had been lacking in Italy for a long time (at least since the 1980s). This void in the production of knowledge was even more dramatic in terms of policy agenda: not only had the urban become an increasingly unidentified object (CSS, 2011), but it was also feeding a void in the field of public policies and institutional design. No explicit urban policy has, in fact, been (and is even now) available in Italy for a long time (Urban@it, 2016). At the same time, some of the recent institutional reforms are based on an interpretation of urban regions still built on a metropolitan imaginary, thus further contributing to enlarge the debate between the *de facto* city and the *de iure* city (Calafati, 2014).

A research project of national concern: main challenges and expectations

Assuming this perspective in an exploratory way, discussed by several strands of international literature and which we started synthetically to indicate with the concept of the “post-metropolis” (Soja, 2011), we submitted a PRIN research project entitled “Post-metropolitan territories as emergent forms of urban space: coping with sustainability, habitability, and governance.” The project, which was funded and run between 2013 and 2016, involved nine universities in Italy (Politecnico di Milano, Università del Piemonte Orientale, Politecnico di Torino, IUAV Venezia, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Università di Roma La Sapienza, Università di Napoli Federico II, Università di Palermo, Università di Sassari) and other research centers (in particular ISPRA, Istituto Superiore per la Protezione e la Ricerca Ambientale) with a large and interdisciplinary network of scholars and researchers.² We aimed to explore major urban areas in Italy, with particular attention on the production of urban regionalization, or “regional urbanization” processes (Soja, 2011), trying to produce both a theoretical and an empirical contribution to the construction of analytic and interpretative frameworks able to describe what we considered as the emergence of multi-scale processes of urbanization, based on a complex interaction between path-dependency and innovations and consistently challenging the fields of urban studies, planning and urban governance. In this perspective, the project aimed to provide significant indications also in the practices and policies field, being interested in developing interpretative scenarios able to suggest innovative policy approaches, in particular in terms of livability, sustainability and governability.

The research activities developed during the three years focused in particular on the emergence of new scales, dimensions, morphologies and typologies of “urban”

that seemed to escape, also in the Italian context, the traditional center-periphery paradigm and the related policy treatment. An unaccomplished metropolitan season seems in fact to distinguish the Italian context from other ones – both from the settlement pattern and the institutional process point of view. On the one hand, the historical polycentric urban network has, in fact, interacted with specific effect on the growth of capital cities, producing something that cannot be classified in terms of metropolitan, nor in terms of sprawl or suburbanization; on the other, the historical polyarchy and central role of municipalities have so far not allowed the real implementation of supralocal or regional authorities able to intercept and deal with the new scale of processes, bypassing the traditional municipal and city boundaries. Facing this specificity, we were interested in testing if the post-metropolis paradigm could introduce us to a different interpretation of the current urbanization phase. In this perspective, the research project was developed along three main axes during the three years: the construction of interpretative images (*explorations*), the identification of problems linked with the nature of the current urbanization processes (*questions*) and the design of innovation scenarios (*scenarios*).

In the first direction, the research project developed an in-depth investigation of transformation processes occurring in major Italian urban areas, based on the production of a quantitative database responding to key research questions. In particular, a research protocol was developed which aimed at providing an answer to a set of research questions: which kind of processes are main Italian urban areas experiencing? Can they be described according to the traditional metropolitan concept or can the post-metropolis conceptualization provide an interesting framework to describe new forms of urbanity? In particular, can we recognize the emergence of new problematic urban challenges or, on the contrary, a new urbanity offer, as an outcome of the new dimension, size and nature of the urban phenomena explored?

In implementing the research project, a large part of our effort was concentrated on the development of a research framework useful for producing new analytical and interpretative portraits of large urban areas in Italy. The production of this was a central step in the consolidation of research questions and the construction of research devices able to develop them. The decision was taken to make use of a quantitative research approach in order to select indicators that could measure and describe processes of social, economic, environmental and political change. On the basis of this research protocol, supported by GIS (geographical information system) and web technologies, it produced the so-called “Atlas of post-metropolitan territories” (*Atlante dei territori post-metropolitani*; see Chapter 2 for details), an open web resource thought of as an observatory prototype to be used by researchers, scholars, practitioners and decision-makers, but also everyday citizens.³

The quantitative research protocol has been applied to nine case studies (Turin; Milan; Venice and Veneto; Florence and Tuscany; Rome; Naples; Palermo; south-eastern Sicily; Gallura – the latter two as counter-cases), selected because they are representative of major urban areas in Italy or unexpected processes of post-metropolitan nature in non-typical urban contexts. The delimitation of the cases, together with their selection, and the construction of the protocol, can be

considered as some of the most significant elements of the research project, both in terms of methodology and content. The research protocol was in fact applied to two different strategic exploration devices: the so-called *squares* (in Italian, originally *tasselli*) and the *corridors* (TEN-T Core Network Corridors).

The *squares* are 100 × 100 km wide (a bit smaller in the insular cases) observation “windows” inside which the exploration was developed, trying to overcome administrative boundaries and observe the nature, dimension, forms and significance of the social, political, economic, institutional and environmental challenges affecting main urban areas in Italy. The *squares* are thought to explore, in a manner that cannot be taken for granted, the emergence of new socio-spatial patterns and test the gradient hypothesis proposed by Edward Soja. They are positioned over the map, as each chapter will argue, in relation to some original research hypotheses on the specific nature of the urban regions explored, in particular taking into account the complex interplay between path-dependency and innovation. The *squares* are, in this respect, used to enlarge the viewpoint, unbundle it from traditional administrative geographies, possibly exploring new boundaries and measuring the nature of observed processes that question the traditional center–periphery dimension. The *squares* are thought to check processes of socio-spatial differentiation inside each urban region while providing a common spatial reference aid for comparing the consistency and nature of phenomena observed inside the different urban areas explored. In particular, the explored *squares* cover the most important urban areas in Italy, where one could expect to better test the post-metropolis conceptualization. Two additional counter-cases were originally selected in order to test it in non-traditional urban contexts: eastern Sicily and northern Sardinia. They are two island territories, affected in the last decades by important urban change linked to different models of tourist development, which seemed to be experiencing some interesting processes of urban change with traces of post-metropolization (emergence of urban density profiles; complexification of the social structure; hybridization of landscapes; erosion of the urban/non-urban boundaries).

The *corridors* were introduced as a counterbalance: they represent the main infrastructural and logistic corridors as defined by the European Union: by crossing the *squares* they help test the necessity to overcome the center–periphery logic in a transcalar and relation scale, and they provide the opportunity to explore an unedited urban geography. The *corridors* were studied in particular by the local research unit of Piemonte Orientale, interested in developing an observation and understanding of regional urbanization processes able to intercept and describe the formation of large urban regions all over the Italian territory.

Each research unit contributed to the production of the research framework and to its application in a specific territorial context, basically corresponding to the reference territory of the local research units and teams, with the aim of producing in-depth interpretations of local cases, as well as contributing to a discussion at national level. On this basis, every research unit produced a report-monography dedicated to the different *squares*, which we decided to call *regional portraits*. The idea was to produce a series of interpretative portraits of the urban regions explored, based on a common research protocol that was not necessarily comparative, but which could express significant research hypotheses at both local and national

levels. Indeed, each research unit developed the portrait not only adopting the protocol in the background, but assuming specific key perspectives considered relevant to the discussion of peculiar processes of change, as will be evident when reading the chapters of this book. It proposes a collection, a *gallery*, of regional portraits, where each portrait is conceived as a highly interpretative picture of the case as well as a contribution to the general research hypothesis in a non-linear and holistic representation of post-metropolitan Italy. All in all in this sense, as we argue throughout the book, it provides an image of urban Italy that is quite different from the uniform, continuous and homogeneous urban region described by Soja and Kanai (2007) – and even more from the “Rom-Mi-Tur” depicted by Florida (2008, p. 55) – as the outcome of a complex interplay between path-dependency and innovation.

This book: structure and contents

This book has three major aims: (1) to contribute to the international discussion and in particular to the debate on the necessity of a new urban theory (Brenner, 2014); (2) to introduce and discuss some of the most relevant methodological challenges related to the exploration and interpretation of the current forms of the contemporary urban world; and (3) to present and discuss an updated portrait of contemporary Italian urban phenomena. In this perspective, the book is characterized by a balance between theory and empirical findings, being at the same time a relevant resource for discovering the Italian context and aiming at producing a significant contribution to urban theory and research.

These objectives are achieved both in the introductory chapters, presented in Part I, and in Part II, which is dedicated to illustrating the regional portraits. In particular, Chapter 2 presents the main methodological challenges related to a key output of the PRIN research: the “Atlas of post-metropolitan territories” (*Atlante dei territori post-metropolitani*) designed and implemented with the ambition to build an observatory on urban regionalization processes in Italy (PRIN Postmetropoli, 2015). Part II collects the nine regional portraits developed by the different research units involved in the project: the chapters were constructed following a shared line of observation, according to which the case is presented highlighting its specificity in the Italian context and the reasons behind the positioning of the *square* framing a specific territory. Each regional portrait reflects on three different dimensions of change, trying to unveil the complex interplay between path-dependency and innovation: the social, the spatial and the institutional, adopting the hypothesis that social change often precedes spatial change and that institutions often follow social and spatial change at a certain distance. This approach was discussed during the research seminar held in Milan in February 2015, during which the international advisory board of the project was invited to discuss preliminary results.⁴ The regional portraits also anticipate some specific key issues, in relation to its implication on the specific case. In this respect, the regional portraits proposal situated arguments on a number of key issues, which are more generally presented in Part III of the book. This is composed of six different contributions which provide critical elements on several

key issues. The chapter by Perulli, Lieto, Garavaglia and Pennati illustrates the *corridor* dimension and copes with the transcalarity of processes of regional urbanization. The role of physicality and territory is discussed by Paba and Perrone. The challenges in the field of governance and citizenship are exposed by Fedeli, while De Leo and Palestino argue about the relevance of regulation and “s-regulation” matters. The chapter by Fregolent and Vettoretto (with Bottaro and Curci) presents the results of a socio-economic cluster analysis and synthetically proposes to identify different urban typologies of contemporary Italy. Finally, the chapter by Cellamare and Vettoretto puts forward some final hypotheses on the peculiarity of the Italian context. The final chapter presents conclusions by the editors about the results of the research project and argues about the relevance of the post-metropolis conceptualization in the Italian context, in particular with some implications on the policy dimension and on the sphere of spatial planning.

Notes

- 1 The substantive use of the adjective “urban,” which will be quite frequent in this book, derives from the lexicon of Henri Lefèbvre (1970).
- 2 For a complete list of the colleagues that have participated in the PRIN research project, read the initial note in each regional portrait and in the chapter by Perulli, Lieto, Garavaglia and Pennati.
- 3 The *Atlante* is designed to be implemented over time, also with the contribution of researchers not formally members of the original network. During the second and third years, for example, the construction of the atlas has been extended to other urban areas – Genoa, Bologna and Bari – with the contribution of other research units with the aim of promoting further information on related cases (see PRIN Postmetropoli, 2015).
- 4 The international advisory board was composed of: Professor Peter Ache (Radboud University Nijmegen, Netherlands), Professor Louis Albrechts (emeritus, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium), Professor Simin Davoudi (Newcastle University, UK), Professor Christian Lefèvre (Université Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée, France), Professor Klaus R. Kunzmann (emeritus, Technical University of Dortmund, Germany), Professor Willeem Salet (University of Amsterdam, Netherlands), Professor Iván Tosics (Metropolitan Research Institute, Budapest, Hungary).

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