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Urban policy in Italy: not so absent, after all

Marco Cremaschi, Nataša Avlijaš

Talking urban policy in Europe, a first warning should regard the link between city and development, along with the discourse which has evolved around the theory of urban competitiveness. This condition is crucial, but not easy to bring about. Changes that involve the cities, especially in the South, take place within an 'urban hierarchy' which in Europe has remained stable since the eighteenth century, with very few exceptions.

Instead, the basic idea behind the policies is that the cities promote an accelerated and sudden development, of the kind that occurred in Los Angeles at the beginning of the twentieth century, when it became the capital of world cinema, or in the Silicon Valley around the end of the same century, when the computer industry gave rise to the new, mind-blowing technological agglomeration of the area. The hope is that the technological production chain (cinema, computer, automation, etc.) will couple with the agglomerative factors of the city (abundance of personnel, concentration of graduates, incentives for innovation, etc.) and beget benefits for the entire surrounding region. It's a daring bet; there have been extraordinary payoffs, but they have been rare. The competitiveness aspect is fundamental for the cities, but has different meanings: on the one hand the cities are properly in competition in attracting foreign investments, which are rare and difficult to capture; on the other hand they have to offer conditions of efficiency to businesses so that they can be competitive. Welladministered cities

produce more 'intelligent' territories in relation to the challenge of globalisation. In this respect, competition, cohesion and sustainability are less at odds with one another than they might appear.

Scientific literature on this matter encompasses a vast and consolidated debate. From the 1970s on the cities of North America and Europe have gone through crises and transformations. The enormous loss of jobs in traditionally industrial cities led to a desperate search for recipes for economic development. From the very start, the question of what exactly makes a city, or a territorial area, competitive appears very cloudy. The definitions derive from an extensive and well known literature, based on four theoretical cornerstones (Porter and Krugman, Storper and Kresl).

What we are interested in here is to provide a frame of the possible approaches, albeit schematic, and the Italian urban and regional policies within such a scheme. Consequently, figure on p. 14 illustrates four approaches (key characteristics and potential economic models) to territorial competitiveness. The horizontal axis shows the actions that promote competitiveness respectively in terms of expanded efficiency of the territorial system, or quality of life on the left, and of efficiency in the business environment, that is the comparative advantage of the enterprises, on the right. The vertical axis shows a knowledge based economy (attracting leading businesses) on one side; and a diversified and 'tertiary based' economy, developing from the *status quo*, on the other edge. There are some important issues when economic theories are applied to urban and territorial policies. Assuming that the territories do compete with each other,

the competition takes place in a different way from that of the companies. Individual factors (connectivity, capacity, quality of life, innovation) seem to matter differently in the theoretical approaches. Things change again when the scale considered goes from between national to regional, or even urban, because the mix of factors and the governance change as well.

Instead, in political rhetoric there is an almost universal tendency to claim that there is no contradiction between competitiveness and cohesion, governance and in certain cases sustainability. The result, within the academic sphere and in political discourses, is a sort of optimistic, yet somewhat upsetting, 'New conventional wisdom' (Gordon, Buck 2004), that easily conciliates discordant objectives. All this said, stating that urban policies are often "highly differentiated" (Ciciotti 1993) is not an irrelevant observation: on closer inspection, it means heterogeneous (and relatively predictable) on the one hand, and markedly context dependent on the other.

Instead, the European Commission appears to be convinced that certain politically crucial outcomes (growth, innovation and consensus) are specific to urban environments, and that urban initiatives can exert appreciable multiplying effects (albeit in the long term). This opinion is apparently shared by certain member states (Odpm 2004; the "poles of competence" in Germany, the creation of "poles of territorial competitiveness" by DATAR, partially taken up by our own MIIT: 2005). From these references, and in particular from the work of the British government, we can identify five objectives' families or 'structural' actions, plus one rather particular final one.

These are less general and more hybrid objectives than those defined by the theories on competitiveness, and are instead closer to practice. The first family of objectives concerns actions that bring advantages to the system efficiency, focusing mainly on connectivity (infrastructures and tangible and intangible networks). Almost all the regions undertake such actions, with the intermodal and transnational activity being more relevant in Liguria and in the Adriatic regions (where the ports part of the cities). The diffusion of ICT and networks should sustain connectivity. So should the creation of city networks and other informal networks, while effectively the connection with markets and city networks is pursued through Fairs and territorial marketing rather than stable systems of relations.

As regards the second family of actions, the key to innovation lies in the *human capital*, and more specifically in a *skilled workforce*, and to a certain degree in the ability to interlink the demand and supply of skills, that is the knowledge transfer between universities, research, enterprises and institutions. At the moment, however, what prevails is training directed at the enterprises. Only in a few cases university centres present within the territory are supported, in an attempt to integrate these into the productive fabric. In the case of Sardinia, significant attention is focused on the training of human resources within local government and institutions, especially in the health sector.

The third family concerns *innovation*, which is stimulated, both in the institutions and in the enterprises, principally through incentives for the purchase of new equipment or the application of new technologies, followed by

actions for the spread of IT. Proper innovation (new products, new technologies) is in certain cases stimulated through the direct funding of studies and research, and more often by attempting to stimulate the knowledge transfer between the universities (research centres) and the entrepreneurial fabric. The fourth element of this list, the *quality of life*, emerges from the combination of factors related to environment, culture and housing. The southern regions have concentrated significant resources on the urban environment and on social policies, while in Objective 2 (partly because of restrictions on boundary definition) actions on the environment prevail. Finally, the last and most elusive element is the *strategic capacity* to mobilise and implement longterm development strategies, frequently pursued in a fairly unsystematic manner. Effectively, there are very few investments for permanent structures on the territory in comparison to the temporary actions, for example for the duration of the tenders for access to funding, while structural transformations and competitiveness demand time. The analysis of the theoretical literature on the one hand and the initiatives and policies on the other hand have affinities but no distinct correspondences. Certain options are more frequent in the policies, and others only vaguely translated into measures. The analysis of the regional programming documents confirms this layout. In this analysis we felt it was appropriate to distinguish more clearly the role of the infrastructures, which are preponderant in more than one case. Almost all the documents take up the Community directives, sometimes

changing the investment amount percentages. The programming documents of the southern regions had a greater thematic scope, extended to the Centre-North in the 2000-2006 programming. The promotion of enterprises and development (integrated in the urban policies) is present throughout the South and the islands. The actions of urban regeneration reflect both the local requirements and the presence and interaction with other initiatives (Urban and funding linked to major events). The spatial target, that is the limitation of the actions to specific portions of the urban territory, is in some cases imposed by the programmes themselves, and in others reflects regional policy choices. The territorialisation of the urban initiatives is weak in half of the regional documents. The investigation of the four regions (Piedmont, Veneto, Tuscany and Lazio) has further amplified the impression of a local framework of the urban cities which is at once complex and fragmented. In these four cases the urban models, composition and performance are not comparable, making a shared orientation framework fairly unlikely; even within the regions, the distinctive features of its urban network are not fully considered (in this regard, the recognition of Rome as capital that emerges on the part of Lazio is an exception). Some sort of urban focus still emerges, effectively even more than what regulations or policy guidelines suggested, yet more often than not lacking a clear strategic framework. Again, it is not pure coincidence that these very regions are experimenting metropolitan master plans, with no particular connection to the SDP (to give just one example: the master plan of Turin only

partially exploits the suburban policies, one of the most fertile intersections of Community programmes with local initiatives). Over the last decade Italy has experienced the proliferation of numerous initiatives focused on the city and territory (the subject of a growing body of literature: see Properzi 2006). A certain urban dimension in development policies is present in Italy, albeit in an implicit manner and frequently entrusted to local initiatives. Cities already appear to be doing without national and regional policies; but it is by no means to their absolute benefit, or to that of the regions or the State. Isolated development policies (at times even innovative) risk being occasional or redundant. Suffice it to say that Rome and Milan compete on airports, trade fairs and Olympics. This phenomenon regards capitals and the major cities, which also have the capacity to finance their investments. They sometimes even influence their Region, and are gaining statutes of increasing independence. Other cities and municipalities, non necessarily of modest status but with fewer resources, are less affected. On the other hand, there are no particularly strong precedents of innovative urban programmes within regional or national programming. The Urban initiatives were successful, until they were transformed from ambitious social programmes into more traditional projects for urban regeneration. The principle of territorialisation of the ITP (Integrated Territorial Projects) or ILDP (Integrated Local Development Projects) was innovative, but it did not specifically concern the cities, and even then the programmes did not

necessarily have a distinctive and innovative character. These programmes mobilised significant resources, both public and private, with clearly visible effects upon the territory. In comparison to the last decade, not only do we have to admit that there has been an urban policy, but above all that certain concomitant elements have changed. The various programmes can be traced to three different families. The first, more oriented towards housing and construction, albeit revised by the integrated approach, reveals a limited specific characterisation, except for the instrumental ends of regeneration, and a limited social orientation. The second favours the district and integrated area actions, combining variously the Community and other inspirations, with a fair capacity for learning. The third, with a clearly stated territorial background albeit of diverse origins and clearly more problematical (ITP and IDLP, implementation methods for the Community Support Framework 2000-06 and the National Operational Plan 2000-06, urban Framework Programme Agreements), reveals vaster ambitions and an orientation towards capacity building and social inclusion. A different approach, along with a more complete and complex strategic vision of the cities, emerges when observing the actions proposed at urban scale within complex programmes, and comparing them with the competitiveness factors. Looking back to figure on p. 14, four different development scenarios can fit into the theoretical and action framework defined. The main scenario, glorified by the rhetoric of the urban renaissance, is at the lower left corner. The policies of urban redevelopment, with the visible consequences in

terms of gentrification, are almost universal. Basically, the core of urban initiatives meets the arch that represents policies in real estate development. Nevertheless, some differentiation is peeking through. The initiatives that diverge from the above are not rare, especially in *tertiary diversification* (the promotion of new peripheral centralities). If accompanied by an increase in the efficiency of the entrepreneurial system, this entails a scenario with few changes in the urban fabric that may still attract investments.

In another direction, the combination of actions on the urban fabric and on the new economies leads more easily to a *festivalisation* of the cities, understood as sites for the 'consumption' of culture, knowledge exchange and major events. The last of the scenarios, linked to the perspective of *knowledge cities*, fosters a vision of technological development and advanced economies. These initiatives are still rare, especially if we move from words to action. But they are increasing in number and we can expect a significant growth in this sector.

In conclusion, we can say that the debate on competitiveness is very fertile, but tends to overrate theoretical aspects (for example the centrality of the site or the enterprise, or the tertiarisation in relation to the transition to a knowledge economy). In theory, given the institutional differences, the cities sustain the real estate market and the improvement of the physical context, while the regional and super-regional policies provide incentives to enterprise and target knowledge.

Instead, possibly not surprisingly, the policies implemented by the regions and cities are much more mixed than we would normally expect. The range

is much wider, and some of the large cities are more active in enterprise and innovation policies than the small regions, and viceversa. Cities and regions' commitments cover multiple arenas, partly because of the legacy of the past, in the South; and partly for matters of consensus. There is no a single pure policy model; we rather ascertain various significant recurrences, summarised by the coloured area in the graph.

In the end, policies for urban regeneration, technological development or 'festivalisation' (the new economy of the city of tourism and cultural innovation) are not alternative to each other. Rather, they generate one another. In such a setup, promoting a policy scenario means reconstructing the evolution from one approach to another.