

## **ACTORS, IMAGINARIES AND POLICIES OF URBAN REGENERATION IN SOUTHERN ITALY: TOWARDS A SMART URBANISM?**

ARTURO DI BELLA<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

*Actors, imaginaries and policies of urban regeneration in Southern Italy: towards a smart urbanism?* – This article critically analyses mobile models of urban regeneration, such as smart city, and interrogates their role in Italian southern urban policy. First, it recalls some elements of neoliberal relationship between urban regimes and regeneration policy models. The focus is then directed at Italian southern context, considering the specific and contradictory transition from Keynesian to neoliberal urban regulation. Finally, through the lens of regeneration processes, the paper discusses critically the influence of smart city model on territorial imaginaries, governance arrangements, and policy practices.

### **1. Introduction**

This article critically analyses cutting-edge urban regeneration models, such as smart city, and scrutinises their implementation in southern Italian cities during neoliberal transition. The aim of the paper is twofold since I discuss the critical aspects linked with dissemination of smart city mobile model as a means for investigating the evolutionary neoliberalization developed in Italy during last decades, and then the influence of neoliberal scripts of urban regeneration on governance arrangements, territorial imaginaries, and policy practices in Italian southern cities.

The theoretical framework through which this topic is examined includes economic and political urban geography, especially studies on urban regime and regeneration policy. For the case study of the Italian Mezzogiorno, the paper makes use of the social science literature and of institutional reports in order to discuss the changing nature of urban policy cycles.

In the first section, I consider some elements of the relationships between urban coalitions, regeneration policy discourses and processes, and the mobilization of models of competitive urbanism through transnational circuits of policy transfer. In particular, the article critically interrogates the conceptual and policy dimensions of smart city model, as actually the most influential in urban planning, policy and politics, focusing on theoretical and operative limits, rhetorical aspects and the risks linked with its uncritical assumption.

In the second section, the paper looks at the context of southern Italian cities, focusing on transition from Keynesian to neoliberal urban regulation, through the lens of territorial regeneration processes. Drawing on a conceptualisation of neoliberalization as a historically specific and internally contradictory process of

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Catania, arturo.dibella@unict.it

politically guided intensification of market rule in socio-spatial transformation, I discuss its evolutionary trajectories across the cycles of politics during last decades and its role in on-going processes of urban restructuring.

The third and final section examines “actually existing neoliberalism” in regeneration policy of southern Italian cities as result of a path-dependent, historically evolutionary and geographical uneven process of neoliberalization that in the economic crisis context is strongly energized by the emergent imaginaries of smart urbanism.

## 2. Urban regimes, regeneration policy and smart urbanism

Over the past twenty years or so, urban renewal and regeneration policies have developed in parallel with the new neoliberal economic policy and the reinforcement of entrepreneurial orientation in order to reposition the city on the map of the competitive landscape.

Competition is particularly central in traditional American urban regime studies, which focus on the role of coalitions in strategies of territorial transformation, and their protection of public and private interests (Stone, 1993).<sup>2</sup> The “growth machine”, introduced by Logan and Molotch, is the most notorious image of urban regime, a broad alliance of local elites engaged in the promotion of economic growth and in the creation of a business friendly climate (Logan, Molotch, 1987). The “welfare regime”, on the contrary, is that led by progressive coalitions and oriented to social inclusion, equity and citizen empowerment (Savitch, Kantor, 2002).

Currently, regime theory has become one of the prevailing paradigms for the study of urban politics also in Europe (Moulaert, 2007) and in Italy (Rossi, 2009; Métropoles, 2013), where scholars explore whether and how neoliberalism has been embodied in new urban imaginaries and the new governance arrangements have been progressively displacing the welfare city, and socio-spatial redistribution.

With the technological transition of ‘90s, new European regeneration regimes emerged, imposing their imaginaries of “urban renaissance”, based on discourses of creative and knowledge economy, while the economic imperatives are pursued through the attraction of investment capital and the “creative destruction” of urban spaces, under the impetus of the speculative need of further capital accumulation (Harvey, 2011).

The creative class theory of Florida represents the most famous and controversial discursive support of a new imaginary of “neoliberal urbanism” (Wilson, 2004) built on a pre-existing process of culturalisation of urban policy, insofar as its narrative have been widely successful, particularly amongst policy-makers and politicians,

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<sup>2</sup>A broad set of four regime types proposed by Stone (1993) captures the relationship between coalitional arrangements and policy agendas: (1) a *caretaker* regime, organized around maintaining the status quo; (2) a *developmental* regime, organized around promoting economic growth while preventing economic decline; (3) a middle-class *progressive* regime, organized around imposing regulations on development for environmental or egalitarian purposes; and (4) a lower-class *opportunity expansion* regime, organized around the mobilization of resources to improve conditions in lower-income communities.

due to its ability to connect in a logical, even if simplistic, sequence economic growth, exploitation of cultural resources, technological innovation, and urban regeneration goals (Florida, 2002). No other urban discourse has been so influencing and widely translated in so many cities, the world over, and since then, repositioning strategies have meant reimagining and recreating urban spaces not just in the interests of the inhabitants, but primarily for mobile outsiders, such as professionals, tourists or investors.

With the on-going internationalization of policy regimes, which involves the communication of neoliberal and market-oriented policies as best practices orthodoxy and the mobilization of certain neoliberal policy models through the mediation of fast policy circuits (Prince, 2012), a growing number of policy makers and urban leaders, persuaded by specialist intermediaries, *gurus*, centres (think-tanks, cultural, university-based), as well as by international agencies, such as UE and World Bank, in the form of public policy programmes and investment incentives, increasingly tend to invoke this, or similar, ideal types, often as the panacea for the many pressing problems of contemporary cities.

Most recently, the buzzword “smart” indicates a new visionary city, based on the integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) applications in certain key dimensions, such as energy, mobility, buildings and governance, which through the negotiation between, and the incorporation of, economic imperatives, ecological integrity and social equity goals is directed at the planning of hi-tech-oriented urban efficiency and sustainability.

In smart city visionary framework, a multi-objective approach of integrated urban, ICTs and digital data development is presented in order to challenge problems of economic growth and competitiveness (smart economy), accessibility (smart mobility), quality of life (smart living), social capital (smart people), political efficiency (smart governance) and environmental performances (smart environment) (Giffinger et al, 2007).

In investigating how in an age of “market triumphalism” new urban models address a post-global recession context, scholars interrogate whether the aspirational discourses of smart city compete with, or are complementary to, neoliberal urban narratives (Gibbs et Al., 2013). In doing so, they point out risks of smart city model mainly focusing on logical validity and theoretical coherence, reconfiguration of urban imaginaries, socio-spatial and economic outcomes, and institutional implications in translating theory in policy practices.

First, the theoretical conceptualization of smart city model suffers from its open-ended definition, which mixes together discussions on smart, cyber, digital, wired, knowledge, intelligent cities etc. Such open-endedness makes the smart city’s vision more flexible and malleable, but it renders the achievement of its operative stage even more complex, the identification of related effects of “smart city” thinking, talking and policies extremely difficult, and the solutions it has to offer regarding fundamental goal conflicts between environmental sustainability and hi-tech-oriented economic growth cannot be tested (Hollands, 2008).

Second, the exaggerated and uncritical enthusiasm about the value of ICTs in resolving urban problems tends towards technological determinism in a way that disregards the social construction processes shaping technological usage (Aurigi, De

Cindio, 2008). The city is envisioned as a physical incarnation of an immense cloud of big data, functioning as a self-regulating organism where regulation and normalisation of body, service and data circulations enable a constant process of optimisation aimed at building a transparent, extendable and adaptable system of systems (Klauser, 2013). In smart city imaginaries and discourses complex problems are presented as abstracted and objectified facts that can be rationally handled through measurement, quantification, and impressive visualizations, with the consequence of a return to a systemic perspective of the city as a passive backdrop for action, where people are assumed as sensors and/or rational deliberative agents, reaction becomes more important than interaction, and potential for political mobilization is excluded from debate (de Lange, 2013).

Third, with regard to social outcomes, smart city has been presented as a “new paradigm” for urban development and innovation management that updates older arguments about digital cities (Kominos, 2009), thus punctually extinguishing more critical analysis, such as Graham and Marvin’s splintering urbanism analysis (Graham, Marvin, 2001). Instead, as smart technologies have the potential to change power structures within society, providing benefits to those with access to new technologies and constraining those without the skills to participate, the splintering urbanism theory offers a useful analytical framework in order to understand the role of the progressive integration of technological infrastructure networks in increasing urban fragmentation and polarization, both economical and social, and of the liberalisation of such infrastructures in creating inequality of access (McLean, 2013). Furthermore, in order to provide more specific directions regarding the selection of policy domains a smart city should address, technology aside, there seems to be an investment program for strengthening certain location factors in support of urban competitiveness (Caragliu et al., 2011), but whether and how key urban sustainability issues (e.g. inclusion, equity, quality of life) are to be achieved remains entirely unclear.

Forth, by adopting the theoretical perspective of governmentality (Raco, Imrie, 2000), other critical studies focus on institutional implications in the translation of theories into policy practices. In this approach, smart city model functions as “disciplinary strategy” (Vanolo, 2013) for administrations and citizens, they both made morally responsible for the achievement of their smart development. In the hand of local political entrepreneurs, these mobile models and their theoretical weakness can be used as “intellectual technology” (Ponzini, Rossi, 2010), in support of discursive strategies, seductive imaginaries and the politics of active participation, aimed at propelling new governance institutions, public-private partnerships and policy practices in search of symbolic justifications, and of adequate private and public funds. The smart city script acts as a “mobilizing discourse” (Peck, 2005), and the call to action for smart people and connected communities, indeed, could mask the intent to incorporate innovative forms of cultural and social expression by local policy-makers, real estate investors and hi-tech multinational corporations, in the name of new city agenda, with the gradual marginalization of those actors who do not share the urban leaders’ visions, and the exclusion of alternative models from the public debate (Hollands, 2008).

To sum up, terminological confusion and theoretical weakness heightens the danger that urban smartness becomes an umbrella-term, under which it is possible to

insert every kind of relationships between urban systems and technological innovation. The translation of this mobile model could mask simple territorial marketing policies, business-led interventions, self-legitimation of urban regimes, and their exploitation as channel for financial resources. Discourses of urban regeneration remain prevalently reductionist and elite-driven, aimed at justifying urban hi-tech-led regeneration policies as imperatives mostly oriented to economic boosterism, meanwhile issues such as socio-spatial justice and democratic inclusion seem to be marginalized, beyond rhetoric of e-participation and social innovation, and theoretical and operative frameworks do not offer any space for debating conflicts and alternative paths (Vicari, 2009).

All the problematic aspects discussed above require more detailed analyses in order to better evaluate the role of neoliberal restructuring project at the local level. Given that, an understanding of actually existing neoliberalism in urban regeneration policy in southern Italy entails an historical analysis of the interaction occurred between the evolution of neoliberal approaches and the contextually specific political-economic conditions, regulatory arrangements and power geometries.

### **3. Urban regeneration and neoliberal transition in Southern Italy**

This section is aimed at reflecting on the more general trends of urban policy waves and on prevailing imaginaries and policies of urban regeneration during the neoliberal reconfiguration of relationships over urban governing, but it is not intended to cover the whole spectrum of single cases, which show great variance across southern Italy.

Through a conceptualisation of neoliberalism as a variegated, cumulative and hybrid process that denotes a politically guided intensification of market rule and commodification (Brenner et al., 2010: 184), an historical analysis of the key moments of neoliberal urban restructuring is necessary to understand its evolutionary pathways in southern Italy. Furthermore, a discussion of the trajectories of this process is consistent with the strong path-dependent nature of actually existing neoliberalism insofar it is conceived as a result of the interaction of neoliberal and extra-neoliberal elements, i.e. of neoliberal regulatory restructuring strategies and pre-existing configurations of socio-political power (Brenner, Theodore, 2002: 357).

The Keynesian approach of post-war urban planning pursued the utopian vision of incessant development of Italian society, first fostering real estate speculation of historical centres, and then, during '60s-'80s, the building of new peripheral residential estates, imaged as model city, self-contained both morphologically and functionally. Locally rooted power blocs, acting as intermediaries between the centre, supplying financial resources, and the periphery, the local context, even if strategically driven and financially sustained by the central state, executed the territorial processes of regeneration and expansion of southern cities.

This “public spending bloc” is an Italian way of proto-neoliberal regime and its entrepreneurial orientation (Rossi, 2009) is associated with a perverse, often illicit, version a public-private partnership, with the latter taking a leading role in defining the rules of the game, pursuing maximal profits from a regulatory monopoly position, through complex networks of political patronage and real estate speculation

practices. Meanwhile clientelism has imposed further limits of coalition, as the main lever of southern cities conflict management and political regulation (Chubb, 1982).

Also in Italy, the early '90s saw the first steps towards neoliberal economic and political mode of governance and regulation, in order to reshape the role of the state in the economy. This process involved peculiar processes of deregulation, privatisation and liberalisation concerning, in particular, the labour market, the housing sector, and some of the most strategic national public utilities, such as energy, telephone, motorway and railway. Given that in Italy, as in many other European states, transition to neoliberalism mostly meant a realignment of state spatial policy and local governance, welfare state bureaucracies and public utilities were downsized and traditional redistributive approaches to spatial policy were significantly retrenched (Brenner, 2004).

Until then, the establishment of regional governments in Italy represented the only reform oriented towards decentralization of state functions, but the emotional pressure caused by the exacerbation of a mafia-state war and the collapse of older political caste after corruption scandals of "Tangentopoli" accelerated the downscaling of the state through the reform of local government, promoting the birth of a new political season marked by local politics taking a leading role.

During this initial phase of "roll-back neoliberalism" (Brenner, Theodore, 2002), because of the move away from Keynesian policies at the national level, municipalities are increasingly constrained to introduce a new neoliberal approach and principles in local governance, such as managerialization of local administrations, and the new public management, in order to lower the costs of state administration, and thereby to accelerate inward investment.

Since local political elites control the major planning and growth issues in urban areas, working closely with developers but largely in control of them, "directive regimes" (Dowding, 2001) emerged, often led by left-wing mayors and coalitions with a progressive orientation (Catanzaro et al., 2002).

The Europeanization of urban policy focusing on urban innovation and socio-economic experimentation supports, at once discursively and materially, widespread culture-led initiatives of urban regeneration drawn upon imaginaries of creative and entertainment economy and representations of competitive urbanism inspired by success examples such as the Barcelona model, and based on forms of public-private partnership, collaborative planning, and negotiated decision-making. Under this adaptation pressure, the experimentation of a multi-level arrangement of governance and of innovative "assemblages of projects" (Palermo, Savoldi, 2002), such as Urban I, Territorial pacts, and so on, guided Italian southern cities towards a late and partial post-Fordist transition (Ruggiero et al., 2007) and encouraged the planning of "culture cities" (Carta, 2004).

Regeneration policy became the central focus of urban policy and, some years before Florida published its theory on the creative class, truly innovative experiments of creative urbanism were developed through at least a partial integration of physical, symbolic, cultural, intercultural, and hi-tech oriented policies of regeneration.

Such a southern Italian way to urban regeneration as much is characterized by a strong decision-making tendency and a decidedly personalized leadership, as it is subject to internal differentiation in a continuum between experiences strongly

emphasizing the role of symbolic policies and of conventional “command-and-control planning tools”, such as in Naples (Bull, Jones, 2006; Rossi, 2009), and others more firmly engaged in new models of public entrepreneurialism, in the politics of making, and in the integration of the single projects as coherent parts of a more innovative planning process, such as in Salerno, thanks to the plan ideated by Bohigas (Palermo, Savoldi, 2002).

The policy discourses adopted almost everywhere a moderate and social variant of urban neoliberalism, based on the exploitation of urban cultural and historical identity, in order to restore civic pride and to boost urban economy.

The historic city centres become the target areas of renewal, regeneration and revitalization policies and played a central role in marketing a new image for the cities and for their regimes.

The development of several small-scale interventions aimed at the requalification and the functional reconversion of high symbolic value areas, monuments and public buildings offered the opportunity to materialize in the public space, with an immediate impact, the perception of change for local citizens as well as for investors and tourists. In many southern cities, the renewal of symbolic spaces, such as Piazza Plebiscito in Naples and Foro Italico in Palermo, the requalification of inner city such as in Catania, Salerno, Cosenza, Matera, Taranto and Bari, the enlargement or the repositioning of university’s infrastructures and/or the initial regeneration of the waterfront location generated new environments of creative production and cultural consumption. The improvement of creative environments was neither related to economic development in advanced sector, apart from some scattered attempt to affirm a sort of technopolis such as in Catania or in Bari, nor to residence of new creative professionals, nor really directed towards international competition, but however it brought benefits for the urban image and for the touristic attractiveness on the outside, as well as larger use of public spaces for cultural and leisure activities, the rediscovery of territorial identity, and a growing environmental awareness on the inside (Leone, 2004).

At the same time, some evident context-embedded peculiar characteristics erupted, coexisting with other more common features.

First, the hybrid model, as a mixture of top-down managerialism and urban entrepreneurialism, adopted in southern city regeneration policy appeared to be oriented to reassert public control of the planning policy process, in order to underline a clear break with the previous period, clearly in contrast to the public-private partnerships and negotiated schemes commonly pursued in Italy and further afield. Second, it continued to emphasize the spatial dimension of interventions (Palermo, Savoldi, 2002) and to privilege central areas to the detriment of already disadvantaged spatial peripheries, then causing initial processes of gentrification and spatial polarization. Thus, only sectorial output have been achieved, which are not effective by themselves to produce a widespread regeneration of the intervention areas (Governa, 2010), as well as issues such as the reduction of social exclusion and spatial injustice have remained at the margins of policies. Third, while the increased autonomy and power of the mayor effectively shifted decision making away from the intrigue of the party politics, and many projects prioritized procedural transparency and accountability (Rossi, 2009), frequently over a pro-growth strategy

(Bull, Jones, 2006; Dines, 2012), nevertheless private investment and civil society involvement remained very weak and inadequate.

In the political realm, new evocative terms, such as “renaissance” in Naples or “spring” in Sicily, were used as labels of a new city image and of an innovative urban regeneration policy, fixing the policy making on new discursive foundations of public space rediscovery and urban renewal, such as citizenship and inclusion (Dines, 2012). Nonetheless, the rhetoric of inclusion collided with the denial of any form of participatory governance. The imaginaries of an efficient and functional administration as well as their “dirigiste strategies” (Bull, Jones, 2006) appeared difficult to conceal with the issues of integration and participation, which are those of greater potential innovation in international experiences of urban regeneration. Frequently, a rather revanchist tone accompanied the discourse of change that highlighted the reclamation of public space and the rehabilitation of local identity (Dines, 2012), tending to marginalize the weaker sectors of local societies, from immigrants to those natives and social movements whose ideals and practices stood in opposition to official ideas about civic pride, decorum and their pro-growth agenda, or non-growth position (Lo Piccolo, 2000; Vicari, 2001; Rossi, 2009; Di Bella, 2012a).

The downturn and the consequent interruption of the trajectory of urban regeneration policy arrived at the beginning of twenty-first century, when the shift toward progressive government suffered the consequence of a drastic fall in political consensus.

This new cycle is largely characterized by the affirmation of more conservative, hyper-pluralist and entrepreneurial regimes (Stone, 1993), while an upsurge in organized crime and frustration at not seeing structural improvements reduced the initial enthusiasm.

Such a phase of “roll-out neoliberalism” (Brenner, Theodore, 2002) is defined, in particular, by the increasing paralysing political and territorial fragmentation of administrative powers (Swyngedouw et al., 2002), political-infighting and pluralism that renders policy making more difficult, schizophrenic and discontinuous, the return of old-style alignment within policy making process and of formerly excluded politicians, and the growth of criminal powers (Sommella, 2008).

The forceful return of party interference in administrative affairs goes hand in hand with the reemergence of forms of personalized patronage and clientelism, and with a partial change of priorities in urban policy agenda. A deeply interventionist national policy agenda emerges around “social” issues such as crime, immigration, policing and urban order (Peck, Tickell, 2002). The topic of security assumes a previously unknown central role among urban question at the national scale (Allulli, Tortorella, 2013), characterizing both the right and the left political coalitions discourses, especially in parliamentary elections in 2001. In the whole country, between 1998 and 2005, 194 protocols were signed in order to reaffirm the co-responsibility of the Mayor and the Prefect for the state of security in the community. Strengthening the revanchist sides of urban politics emphasized moral discourses about public order on the streets, calling for a zero-tolerance approach which combines repressive measures against the growing local criminality, the informal economy and the socio-spatial disorder caused by both natives and immigrants (Di Bella, 2010). Particularly in southern cities, the protocols were essentially symbolic

responses destined to disappear without producing any significant results, nevertheless, playing a pivotal discursive role in consensus politics of new urban regimes and political entrepreneurs, looking for public legitimation and exceptional powers to challenge the endless emergency state.

As result of a long tradition of exceptional governance in southern Italy (Belli, 1986), this period is also marked by the “normalization of crisis” as the breaking event used instrumentally for the justification of urban and territorial strategies (Amato et al., 2011). Through the relations between continuous and contingent crisis, regarding all the key urban questions – such as waste, water, mobility, housing, unemployment, immigration, criminality – and special powers and measures, the “exception” became the basic principle of social, environmental, and policy regulation (Swyngedouw et al., 2002; Brenner, 2004), often used by traditional powers to confirm and reproduce their legitimacy and therefore, one of the most influential interpretational frameworks of current governance practices in southern cities (Amato et al., 2011; Cafiero, Urbani, 2012).

Despite the restrictions of state expenditures and investments, thanks to these special powers local authorities can continue to play the role of main intermediaries between urban economic interests and the central administrations, both at national and regional level, orienting the policy making towards greater entrepreneurialism, in particular by focusing the short- and medium-term aspirations of traditional sectors (builders, property developers and landlords), while more innovative sectors, such as the cultural and the hi-tech, mostly suffer the economic effects of austerity and of global recession as well as the progressive marginalization within urban regeneration policy agendas.

Under these conditions, also the attempt of launching strategic urban planning processes, aimed to the construction of shared future visions of area, produced limited outcomes. Notwithstanding its relevance in drawing up an orientation and in delineating the basic values concerning public policies (Zinna et al., 2003), numerous aspects interfere with its operational effectiveness: the planning tool too ambitiously conceived, the fragility of local leadership, the top-down guidance, the difficult involvement of private capital, and the substantial loss of confidence in local government (Pasqui, 2011). Thus, as purely rhetorical statements, they are confined in promoting the development strategies stated by the dominant urban regimes, appearing unable to express an effective capacity for action (Governa, 2010). Furthermore, a redundant evocation of creative, hi-tech and knowledge economy-oriented urban imaginaries clashes not so much with national ranking reports that attest the weakness of performances of southern cities on Italian creativity index (Tinagli, Florida, 2005) as with the “dis-regulation” (Donolo, 2001) that characterizes dominant mechanisms of policy making. On the one hand, particularistic circles of intermediation preserve their power by multiplying the opportunities that allow the mediators to mediate and the political leadership maintains influence and control over the processes of territorial transformation through exchange-based relationships, occasionally characterized by corruption and the involvement of criminal powers (Cremaschi, 2007). On the other hand, in contrast with such prevailing mechanism of political and social regulation, strategic planning and their visioning processes build on imaginaries of creative and knowledge city perform a significant symbolic function by making this dynamics

less visible and providing political actors with a repertoire of actions rhetorically oriented toward competitiveness (D'Albergo, Moini, 2013).

#### **4. Between the gap and the crisis: the politics of smart city**

Over the recent years of financial and economic crisis, a new urban question arising globally appears even more dramatic in southern Italian cities because of the legacies of previous crisis and of the imperative of cutting public and social spending.

Furthermore, the complex, confusing and contradictory Italian transition to neoliberalism had first prevented a coherent process of power decentralization, and then led to dangerous effects on the broader territorial national question, in parallel with the moral turn that is defying the whole political discourse in Eurozone.

On the one hand, over recent years we seem to have witnessed a reverse map of policy priorities in the national agenda, with attention shifting from the problems in the south to those in the north, through rhetoric presenting the latter as the engine of national development and the former responsible of its own decline (Viesti, 2009; Gonzales, 2010). On the other hand, the emergency due to the economic crisis is accompanied by the "return" of central power (Perulli, 2013) and used to link the notion of the public good with the repayment of the public debt, while southern cities, in ever more critical financial crisis, are subjected to coercive pressure to cut public services, rapidly privatize, sell public property, and increase planning deregulation.

Furthermore, the current economic recession, which has hit hard those areas mostly dependent on public support, has led to a further increase in the gap between the north and south in Italy.

Between 2007 and 2012 the gross domestic product of southern Italy decreased by 10% compared to 5,7% in the centre-north; the employment rate decreased by 5,1% in the south, while the centre-north showed an, admittedly poor, increase of 0,1%; more than 400,000 young people between 19 and 35 years of age have decided to leave the Italian Mezzogiorno for education or work; at the beginning of 2013, the southern regions per capita income is lower than in Greece; 20% of families are in a situation of poverty and another 30% are extremely vulnerable to poverty (CENSIS, 2013). The economic and social recession as much as the several controversial aspects of EU and national policy, combined with the quality of financial planning and with the economic commitment that the state has guaranteed in support of southern Italy (SVIMEZ, 2012), have caused a further deterioration of territorial competitiveness and of urban quality, with strongly negative demographic, employment and educational effects (CENSIS, 2013).

The inefficiency of southern public institutions to administer public expenditure, increasingly indicated as the main responsible in the analysis and discourse on the "new programming" failure (Gonzales, 2011), concurs in the reality with the effects produced by the context-specific process of neoliberalization, the lack of a national urban policy and the scant attention paid to the southern question, precluding a convergence across Italian regions.

The peculiar Italian way of neoliberal restructuring project has reinforced the tensions between centralization and decentralization in Italian public administration.

On the one hand, the affirmation of new concepts and principles such as subsidiarity, institutional pluralism, participation is accompanied, in practice, with the recentralisation of urban mainstream policy and resources allocation decision-making (Governa, 2010), clearly demonstrating that local authorities are seen more as policy takers rather than policy makers. On the other hands, the decentralization process meant mostly the affirmation of an “asymmetric subsidiarity” (Alulli, Tortorella, 2013) in which the growth of functional responsibilities assigned to local governments goes hand in hand with the restriction of resources and of autonomous decisional spaces and with the imposition of new local financial constraints, such as the Internal Stability Pact.

Furthermore, also the inattention in southern question can be observed in some national choices. The liberalization of local public utilities (transports, waste etc.), for example, in the partial form of public tender for commitment, started slowly, and furthermore ignored the institutions of effective competitive mechanisms, thereby preventing the opening up of important local services market to external providers. The result in southern cities is the protection of the interests of already existing providers and even the survival of “exceptional” management that remains outside any kind of democratic control and accountability (Barca, 2009; Amato et al., 2011).

At the same time, the absence of a national urban policy, that is the cause of the enduring fragmentation of the system of actors and initiatives involved in urban policies in Italy (Cafiero, Urbani, 2012), is partially compensated for by the incremental adaptation to the dominant policy paradigms (Alulli, Tortorella, 2013), and by the introduction of policies aimed at promoting “competitive relations among subnational levels of state power” (Brenner, Theodore, 2002; Brenner et al. 2010).

Over the last few years, two different plans have reinvigorated the debate on the regeneration of southern Italian cities: “national plan for cities” and “Growth decree”.

In 2012, the Italian Minister of Infrastructure launched the national plan for cities, a programme aimed at the regeneration of deprived urban areas that should result in the provision of new infrastructures, urban redevelopment, and the building of car parks, homes and schools. In January of 2013, there was the selection of 28 projects, 11 in southern cities, from 457 proposals of local governments.<sup>3</sup>

The Growth decree, in line with the European policy agenda “Horizon 2020”, is centred on smart city vision, by now also in Italy a priority instrument of urban regeneration. The smart city programme has launched two calls for tender in southern regions: “Smart and City Communities” and “Social Innovation”, first reserved only for southern Italian cities.

The first is part of a more comprehensive general programme “Italian digital Agenda” and has allocated 200 million euro for the partial financing of 38 “high-tech-oriented experimental projects” aimed at mobility and logistics, healthcare, education, e-government through cloud computing solutions, environmental sustainability and energy efficiency, tourism and culture. Thanks to social innovation

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<sup>3</sup> The list of selected projects is available on line [http://www.ediliziaeterritorio.ilsole24ore.com/pdf2010/Edilizia e Territorio/ Allegati/Free/Citta/2012/12/Schede.pdf](http://www.ediliziaeterritorio.ilsole24ore.com/pdf2010/Edilizia_e_Territorio/Allegati/Free/Citta/2012/12/Schede.pdf).

programme, another 58 projects by young people resident in the southern regions have been selected for access to financing of an additional 40 million euro by the European Fund for Regional Development 2007-2013.<sup>4</sup>

These two programmes have been followed by the launch of a further two: one for “smart cities and communities” in northern regions with a funding of 700 million euro, and one hi-tech national clusters of 408 million euro (40 million aimed at southern regions, 368 million at the rest of Italy).

Anticipating the activation of these projects, a first scepticism regards the regional distribution of resources that does not seem aimed at reducing the gap across Italian regions. Second, other justified doubts chiefly regard the ability of southern local governments to plan and execute such a projects. In fact, they have the task of activating participatory procedures between the public and private companies, of proposing planning tools able to connect spatial requalification with wider public interest goals, and of making technical offices and skills available in support of implementing actors (Ruggiero, 2012).

Third, there is the evident fragmentation of the proposed interventions. Although the call for an integrated approach to urban development is currently the most widespread in scientific literature, institutional initiatives still appear to be characterized by a sectorial approach.

This difficulty of translating the theoretical most emphasized integrated approach into practice is symbolized by the re-production of smart city benchmarking analysis (Vanolo, 2013), such as I-City Rate report (FORUMPA, 2012), which represents, in a hi-tech perspective, the historical disparities between northern and southern Italian cities (Gonzales, 2011). The use of a set of multiple statistical indicators reinforces a sectorial vision and reduces the complex urban dynamic and its smartness to assessable and enumerable units, in order to produce new and specific ways to organize problems and prefigure solutions. Furthermore, the rating analysis, as a “performance technology”, implicitly indicates the obligation of southern cities, most of them in the lower side of the rating, to become more similar to northern cities, and indeed to redefine their problems and priorities, and to reorganize their agendas, according to the smart city imaginary (Vanolo, 2013).

All the southern cities engaged in submitting their proposals, such as Naples, Palermo, Bari and Syracuse, have created public-private partnerships, in form of associations, composed by public, semi-public and private actors, think tanks, and especially big players that changes the geometries of power inside urban regimes. Syracuse for example is the only Italian, and one of 100 cities in the world, selected to receive a Smart City Challenge grant from IBM as part of its effort to build a smarter planet. As one of the most influent big players engaged in implementing hi-tech solutions for achieving smarter cities around the world, IBM advocates a techno-mediated regulatory apparatus that approaches reality as an ensemble of perfectly intelligible and manageable system of data (Klauser, 2013) that once is analysed and shared through software products, mathematical algorithms and statistical tools should enable city administrators to better understand and control

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<sup>4</sup> The list of selected projects is available on line ([http://www.ponrec.it/media/91513/elenco\\_progetti\\_di\\_innovazione\\_sociale\\_approvati.pdf](http://www.ponrec.it/media/91513/elenco_progetti_di_innovazione_sociale_approvati.pdf)).

their interventions through the optimization of the use of limited resources (IBM, 2011). In line with this approach, IBM is committed to actively supporting local administrators of Syracuse in the collection of specific data about urban core operational systems that are analysed in order to highlight strengths and weaknesses, to provide initial recommendations for urban regeneration, and to develop a contextually specific smart city strategy.

In the name of greater speed, flexibility and efficiency, these big players take the lead inside new quasi-private and highly autonomous organizations, without democratic legitimation, and become the main actors of urban renewal, while the claim for social innovation remains strongly subordinated to and mediated by dominant interests of hi-tech industry, thus excluding the concerns of the place-based constituencies that are most directly affected by their decisions (Brenner, Theodore, 2002) and marginalising alternative imaginaries of digital urbanism (Di Bella, 2012b).

Because also of the difficulties at state level in implementing the much-trumpeted Italian digital agenda, at the moment the politics of smart city appears no more than a new form of “managerial localism” (Raco, Imrie, 2000), based on the distribution of reduced financial resources through territorial competition (Brenner, Theodore, 2002) and on the redefinition of smartness at local level as relational resource in the politics of active participation through the devolution of its governance to public-private macro-actors (Ponzini, Rossi, 2010).

On the one hand, during the deepening phase of neoliberalization, the reconfiguration of the responsibilities to reduce the gap between the north and the south increasingly means a “downward” disciplinary imposition of regulatory experiments and of “competitive forms of policy transfer” (Brenner et al., 2010). On the other hand, the balance of power inside these new local governance institutions involved in leading such a cycle of urban transformation remains unclear (Holland, 2008; Vanolo, 2013).

So conceived and performed, despite of progressive potential, the smart city model runs the risk to be used by new urban governance arrangements exclusively for stimulating hi-tech global market or as the instrumental channel for obtaining funds and public legitimation at the local level, instead of as a means by which to image new solutions for structural problems that continue to affect southern cities today.

While awaiting an evaluation of context-specific impacts produced by the implementation of policies, at the moment the smart paradigm seems to have taken the form of a “discursive project” (Ponzini, Rossi, 2010), which offers seductive imaginaries and visions of urban regeneration (Pratt, 2011), without any guarantee of a parallel strong public commitment directed at meeting the bottom up demand for a real change and progress, at expanding social opportunities, or at shrinking historical gap between the north and the south in Italy.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis of urban regeneration policy in southern Italy has provided evidence of the partial, confusing and contradictory Italian transition to economic and political neoliberal regulation and of the ambiguities and dilemmas associated with the increasing translation of fascinating discourses and models of urban regeneration into planning policy.

Over the recent years of economic crisis, Italian neoliberalization processes have intensified and accelerated as much as their contradictions and the pressure produced by the transportation of dominant paradigms and mobile models on local scale.

The new smart city paradigm became central in EU and national policy agenda and then transferred to locale scale as a means for new market-driven regulatory experiment of policy mediation and territorial competition, just at the time when the question of southern Italy seems to be sidelined in national policy agenda and southern urban regimes have to tackle an extremely serious economic, political and social crisis.

In a situation of impellent necessity for additional funds, the growth of the functional responsibilities of local governments coexists with the restriction of national expenditure and with the imposition of new local financial constraints. During last phase of roll-out neoliberalism, both conditions have already led urban regimes in southern Italy towards stronger dependency from the center, both national and regional, greater orientation to consensus politics, intertwined with the advance of a revanchist city, and economical entrepreneurialism, supported or replaced by special powers justified by persistent emergencies.

These context-specific facets of neoliberal restructuring project and all the other critical issues regarding smart city model discussed above should cause us to consider more seriously the ambiguities and the threats associated with euphoria that is accompanying the “smart” rhetoric in southern cities, by taking into greater consideration the consequences for socio-spatial justice, as well as the institutional implications and the reconfiguration of geometries of power.

In this respect, as the historical analysis has showed, public-private partnerships are nothing new in urban regeneration policy of southern cities. Nevertheless, as these have not been used to transfer risk from the public to the private sector, for wider economic development purposes and/or for outside investment attraction, rather to preserve dominant mechanisms of socio-political regulation and particularistic circles of intermediation, so the politics of smart city is reconfiguring in a completely new way the balance of power inside urban governance arrangements and institutions between public and private, and local and global, actors. Furthermore, smart city narrative, with its requirement for efficiency and sustainability, addresses economic crisis context by intensifying the open-ended nature of neoliberal urbanism possibilities, rather than leads to a fundamental questioning of marked-based approaches and of peculiar Italian neoliberal transition.

Politics, as public realm, is the only place where critical discourses and alternative imaginaries of smart city can deconstruct hegemonic rationalities, unmask the myths and reifications that pervade neoliberal prescriptions of urban innovation, reclamation and reconfiguration, and to then reconstruct determination of public

needs and planning priorities. Otherwise also smart city model is destined to be used as a label to justify allocation of public funds, to legitimise the birth of new institutions of urban governance, to enhance urban regimes and local politicians in neoliberalization of urban regeneration policy, and for political, hi-tech and land speculative needs, leading to a further intra-urban segregation and inter-regional disparity.

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