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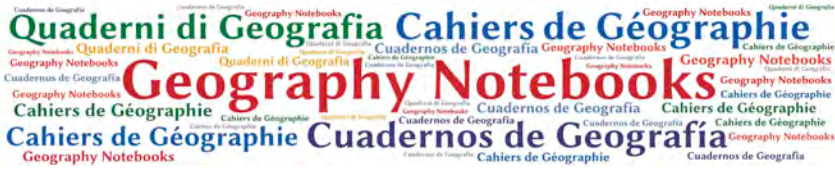
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5 (2022)

2

From Crisis to Crisis: Emergencies and Uncertainties
in Large Metropolitan Areas and Cities
of Southern Europe

Edited by

Paolo Molinari and Pascale Froment

EDITORIAL

- From crisis to crisis: emergencies and uncertainties in large metropolitan areas and cities of Southern Europe 9
Di crisi in crisi: emergenze e incertezze nelle metropoli e nelle grandi città dell'Europa meridionale 18
Paolo Molinari - Pascale Froment

SPECIAL ISSUE

- Airbnb e Covid-19. Il ruolo degli attori professionali nel mercato turistico delle capitali del Sud Europa 29
Chiara Iacovone
- Solidarity networks for grassroots collaboration in response to the pandemic: the case of the city of Valencia (Spain) 43
Julia Salom-Carrasco
- Multiple spatial practices and scales within and beyond City Plaza, Athens 59
Olga Lafazani

Réutilisation sociale des biens confisqués au crime organisé à Lecco et Bari (Italie): quel impact sur la transformation et la valorisation territoriales? 73

Claudia Palermo

Dynamics of metropolisation: the institutional construction of the *Città Metropolitana di Roma Capitale* in the national and regional context 89

Angela D'Orazio - Maria Prezioso

OTHER EXPLORATIONS

La LIPU e il Centro Habitat Mediterraneo di Ostia, esempio virtuoso di sintesi dialettica tra tutela dell'ambiente e valorizzazione del patrimonio culturale 111

Flavio Lucchesi

BOOK REVIEWS

D. Gavinelli e M. Bolocan Goldstein (a cura di), *Regioni e regionalizzazione. Lo spazio-mondo in divenire* (2022) 131

Stefano De Rubertis

J.M. Gurr, R. Parr and D. Hardt (eds.), *Metropolitan Research: Methodes and Approaches* (2022) 137

Sara Giovansana

S. Soriani, A. Calzavara e M. Pioletti, *Riordino territoriale e governance metropolitana. Il caso veneziano nel contesto europeo* (2019) 141

Paolo Molinari

From crisis to crisis: emergencies and uncertainties in large metropolitan areas and cities of Southern Europe

*Paolo Molinari*¹ - *Pascale Froment*²

¹ Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano

² Université Paris 8 Vincennes - Saint-Denis

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1. LIVING THROUGH CURRENT CRISES IN LARGE CITIES OF SOUTHERN EUROPE: CAUGHT BETWEEN PRECARIOUSNESS AND THE REORGANIZATION OF SOLIDARITY INITIATIVES?

The 21st century has provided social sciences with various opportunities for a re-examination of Southern European territorial and social dynamics. Since 2008, multiple aspects of the economic crisis, the migrant “crisis” and the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic – as well as the current geopolitical and energy crisis related to the Russian-Ukrainian war¹ – have affected in particular these territories and societies more than other macro-regional areas. Likewise, policies adopted to tackle the crises at a European level have had peculiar impacts on Southern European countries and have often fallen short of expectations. Hence the importance, given their special characteristics and needs, of re-examining the (sometimes brutal) effects of globalisation on the distinct socio-economic, cultural and territorial fabric of these areas. As pointed out by Maccaglia and Pfirsch (2019, 14), these conditions have led to an “adaptation différenciée et socialement inégalitaire à la violence des politiques d’austerité” generating the typical effects of periods of severe crisis and emergency.

Southern Europe is a macro-region brimming with contradictions. Firstly, it is generally subject to widespread ageing and depopulation with marked differences between urban and rural areas; in addition,

¹ The contributions featured in this issue were developed before the Russian-Ukrainian geopolitical conflict.

despite the obvious need to favour policies aimed at attracting workforce, political forces and public opinion in the area are firmly hostile to immigration, and policies aimed at integrating migrants are rare. Secondly, local real estate markets highly depend on foreign investments, especially in major cities and tourist areas, and on the collective desire for home ownership. At the same time, large cities have been disrupted by urban sprawl, at times combined with the return to the city centre of certain social classes, with capitalisation, and with “touristification” (Semi 2015). In parallel, urban areas are coming under pressure from managing migration flows and social inequality in a context that tends to cut public spending. Furthermore, several decades of neo-liberal policies have severely undermined basic public services – privatisation of large parts of public asset, inadequate health services, heavy reliance on the private sector, etc. – and essential infrastructure for the working class, already severely affected by stagnating wages and rising unemployment. Thus, although the ability to redistribute social benefits to Southern European countries has improved within the framework of the European Union (Allen *et al.* 2004; Eurostat 2020), disparities among countries, regions and populations involved remain high and redistribution systems tend to exacerbate regional and local inequalities, resulting in a wide variety of definitions of social citizenship and forms of inclusion/exclusion, according to the territories and the different territorial scales (Molinari et Rivière 2023). In countries with higher levels of social benefits, the crucial role of public services and infrastructure was successfully demonstrated both during and after the succession of economic-financial crises and the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, during which it was possible to react efficiently and effectively against inequalities and socio-territorial exclusion in health and education above all, but also through social and housing policies, thus enabling a real assertion of citizenship.

The aforementioned issues are among the reasons which make a commitment to field research and reflection both compelling and indispensable, in order to investigate and question the post-crisis and post-pandemic territories, or at least those that have emerged from the most acute phase of each event.

These premises have triggered a renewed interest in Southern Europe and its territorial dynamics among social sciences researchers (Maloutas 2007; Baron et Ter Minassian 2018; Froment 2019; Maccaglia et Pfirsch 2019; Rabbiosi, Coletti, and Salone 2021). Their studies have helped recontextualise the global theories and policies that were conceived by Northern Europe and English-speaking countries.

In this monographic issue, we particularly focused our attention on metropolises and large cities of Southern Europe, and on two smaller cities in Italy, namely Bari and Lecco. In the hierarchical system of world rankings (Global Power City Index, Globalisation and World Cities, etc.), metropolises and large cities of Southern Europe often occupy a peripheral position when compared to the most consolidated global cities. In spite of this, they have undergone processes of urban funding and application of international standards and have become places where the urban policies of the last decades – especially those directed to urban branding, above all in the fields of culture and tourism and of competition in the European and in the global market – have produced significant transformations. Not only this, but also transformations linked to the aforementioned crises must be taken into account, since they are having an impact on contexts that had not yet overcome their own structural fragilities.

In these specific metropolitan frameworks, the temporal timing of multiple succeeding crises (subprime mortgage crisis and subsequent austerity; the so-called migrant crisis of 2015; the pandemic which broke out in 2020; etc.) overlaps with multiple impacts that have been highlighted in different socio-territorial contexts as a result of urban transformation policies and strategies in place for almost thirty years now (Peck 2012). As a matter of fact, urban sprawl, capitalization and “touristification” of city centres, migratory flows, corporate investment, privatisation, etc. had already profoundly altered the urban dynamics of large Southern European cities. Given the recent crises, it is imperative that these territories and urban societies understand and learn how recent phenomena can interact with long-standing issues that are difficult to solve, such as: migrant reception crisis and the widespread tendency to exclude them from the urban landscape; policies addressed to fight organised crime activities; dispossession of acquired rights and counteracting neo-liberal processes that put the weakest and most oppressed strata of society against each other. The question, therefore, is to understand how urban standards, forms of plural mobility and long-term economic changes are combined with the growing instability caused by recent and multifaceted crises, and how these tensions contribute to reshape urban space and to define new territorial inequalities. In addition, we must examine the consequences on the mobilisation of resources by various players, from companies to communities weakened by the ongoing processes (Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer 2012). For fifteen years, crises of different nature have intertwined with uneven and interwoven timelines whose outcomes

remain completely uncertain due to the various solutions provided by governments and urban societies involved. These responses sometimes show a continuity with practices already established in the local areas in question; at other times, they lead to emerging practices that may be short-lived.

Nonetheless, while the Southern European metropolitan realities differ in some respects from others in the EU, this does not mean that they are all going through the same process. In addition to specific policies implemented by each country – from Spain to Greece – regional peculiarities and metropolitan scale of government established a few decades ago combine to form very diverse contexts. In the large cities surveyed, emergencies and uncertainties – which, from time to time, have taken the form of urban austerity, border closing and control, lockdowns, and limitation to mobility – have given rise to experiments and initiatives that, in some cases, have further entailed major forms of solidarity and unprecedented forms of resistance to dominant policies. These responses, with apparently similar matrices, represent a wide variety of peculiar experiences, partly due to the exchange of information on best practices and ‘resistance’ circulating in international urban networks among cities.

In terms of methodology, this has obviously led to a considerable challenge because of the difficulty of scientifically describing unpublished, very recent and fluid case studies, often with still fuzzy boundaries.

2. CASE STUDIES AS A CONTRIBUTION TO THE REFLECTION ON EMERGENCY AND CRISIS SITUATIONS IN URBAN AND METROPOLITAN AREAS

This article contains the contributions of researchers working in various ways in France, Greece, Italy and Spain who participated in the international research project *Métropoles. Crises et mutations dans l'espace euro-méditerranéen*, coordinated by Dominique Rivière (Université Paris Cité) and funded by the Ecole Française de Rome².

² The contributions by Angela D’Orazio and Maria Prezioso, Chiara Iacovone, and Claudia Palermo were presented and discussed at the International Conference *D’une crise à l’autre. Urgences et incertitudes dans les métropoles d’Europe du Sud*, Ecole Française

As anticipated, the aforementioned dynamics of reconfiguration of urban processes in the metropolitan areas and large cities of Southern Europe have had a significant impact in terms of knowledge and investigation and so required the use of a wide range of conceptual and disciplinary approaches. From a methodological point of view, research in urban and regional settings has proved to be extremely difficult and disrupted by a succession of unprecedented, multifaceted events. This has prompted researchers to resort to a wide variety of approaches and scales of analysis to try to account for phenomena that can be unprecedented, or very recent (platform economies), or fluid (migration flows of various kinds) or even not yet recorded by official data. In the following papers, we show how we applied a wide range of research methods, from qualitative, positional and militant (Lafazani), to mixed quantitative-qualitative (Palermo and Salom-Carrasco), text analysis (Prezioso and D'Orazio), or quantitative methods (Iacovone). Within the broad Southern European region, the survey works here collected focus on Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

By means of a comparative approach among four Southern European capital cities (Athens, Lisbon, Madrid and Rome), Chiara Iacovone begins with the assumption that the crisis impacted an already weak area in terms of rental market. Southern Europe is one of the major tourist destinations in the world. The commercialization of the offer on the online market is having a disadvantageous effect on the availability of low-cost rental accommodation. Moreover, the most attractive city areas are those favored by tourists for their proximity to infrastructure and services, thus triggering a process of tourist gentrification. The author highlights the fact that the tourist industry closely linked to the pandemic caused problems to small, non-professional operators, precisely those most attracted by the promises of the sharing economy. Instead, real estate investors speculating on the rental market were able to take advantage both of this situation and of the gradual exclusion of non-professional operators.

In her study covering the case of Valencia, Julia Salom-Carrasco shows how the impact of the pandemic has been exacerbated by the fact that the urban and social fabric in Spain had already been severely chal-

de Rome, Roma, October 7-8, 2021. The authors of this introductory paper would like to thank Dominique Rivière for her commitment during the years of the project in building scientific networks of exchange and collaboration among the countries of Southern Europe.

lenged by the austerity policies, the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis and the business approach to urban development of the previous two decades, thus resulting in a worsening of social inequalities. The author investigates several grassroots solidarity initiatives based on neighbourhood networks, sometimes of temporary duration and not particularly intensive, but concentrated in a few deprived neighbourhoods or city areas which nevertheless are of great significance as they seek to remedy the shortcomings of public sector and public policies. Solidarity and stakeholder networks are ‘embedded’ in the territory, and can constitute an ‘ecosystem of social innovation’, a new kind of collective action produced by diversified practices, capable of adapting to unforeseen situations such as health emergencies. Those who benefit the most are the neighbourhoods where community networks and social capital are more well-established. These practices have been tested by third sector organizations and local businesses and associations and are mainly addressed to local or neighbourhood initiatives. They have a double role, as Julia Salom-Carrasco points out: strengthening solidarity networks and promoting the political empowerment of the community.

Olga Lafazani presents a strikingly rich and original narrative on the occupation and transformation of the City Plaza Hotel in Athens into a migrant shelter between 2015-2017. Using “field notebook” methodology, the researcher presents the results of a militant ‘fieldwork’ initiative reporting – by means of a participative observation – the complexity and multiplicity of the migratory experience and the building of a supportive community and of public areas through the representations of radical and autonomous groups taking part in the initiative. The research, an ethnographic work in which the author’s position is decisive, emphasizes the ‘subjectivities’ and the critical perspective which give space and voice to excluded and marginalized social groups. The author also recounts and analyses, among other things, the spatial processes, dynamics and implications of socio-political relations associated with the transformation of a central urban space – the City Plaza – into an informal and temporary shelter for migrants. Olga Lafazani not only highlights the central role of space at various levels, from the individual building and neighbourhood to the global level, but also shows us how it is possible to give voice to new forms of solidarity through listening, establishing mutual collaboration, building relationships not based on dependency, and sharing urban public spaces. She also shows how to renew the sense of belonging and to design ‘political interventions’ in response to multiple fragmented urban challenges, often triggered by actors responding to supralocal and

commercial logics that produce new boundaries and the dispossession of acquired rights causing conflicts between the ‘subalterns’.

Claudia Palermo, comparing the cities of Lecco in Lombardy and Bari in Apulia, offers a reflection, with regard to regional development, on the return and social re-allocation of properties confiscated from organized crime. Apart from the highly symbolic value, a property or area confiscated and returned to the community can become, as in the case of Lecco, an important opportunity for citizens to reflect upon the presence of criminal and Mafia activities that are often underestimated or undervalued in regions that are distant from those where such activities are more historically rooted. Therefore, the research addresses the temporal aspects – legal, political and social, often disconnected – in the process of confiscation and recovery of buildings owned by the Mafia, as well as the consequences for the regions involved. In terms of regional development, as in the case of Bari, the assets confiscated from organized crime can, in the long term, become resources dedicated to social and cultural initiatives and to promote legality in the urban centres where they are located, even though these projects may be undermined by unexpected events such as the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. This last element, moreover, put many companies and commercial activities in a difficult position by boosting organised crime itself.

Angela D’Orazio and Maria Prezioso describe and reflect on the dual process of urban development and institution-building in the *Roma Capitale* city project, and for the entire metropolitan territory, with the related reforms spread out over thirty years and made crucial by the deployment of EU programs resources. The authors question the dynamics of administrative reorganization triggered by the Italian Act 56/2014 in a climate of austerity, aimed at rationalizing public spending, but creating great political tension for the entire city. They highlight a weak and uncertain process of connecting multiple steps, in which the institutional structures and governance practices are struggling to face the challenges of the ongoing urban development. Moreover, the authors demonstrate that the effects of crises and uncertainty also reverberate across the sphere of local government and heavily influence the work of local stakeholders and authorities.

In the end, two underlying trends can be observed through the analyses presented above. First of all, the weight of the different actors operating in the area, through the power relations established, heavily influences the ability of the metropolitan areas and large cities in question to react against emergency and crisis situations. In the scenarios

described, regional contexts dependent on private capital can certainly be identified, thanks to which the revival of urban economies was made possible, albeit at a cost of capitalizing the economy. However, it is not only the metropolitan areas and large cities better supplied with private capital that are in a better position in times of emergency and uncertainty, but also those in which local institutions at various regional levels, associative networks and social capital are more present and well-established. It is in particular in these specific situations – often at the micro-scale of a neighbourhood – that the most significant experiences of solidarity networks, mobilization of local resources and promotion of political empowerment seem to develop. In this case, however, further analysis is needed to understand whether these valuable local experiences can be extended to other regional contexts.

The first trend is linked to the second. The succession of crises of various nature over the last fifteen years highlights the interweaving of multiple timeframes involving systems of stakeholders with needs and visions that do not always coincide: the most tenuous experiments, as in the case of the City Plaza in Athens or the short-lived intervention of private companies in Valencia (lasting only a few months); the targeted aid launched by the public authorities during emergency phases, as demonstrated by Eurostat statistics³; the legal system's long lead times; the return of confiscated properties or institutional reforms, as seen in the case of the metropolitan city of Rome. In a time when crises are for their most part still 'open' or in progress, also exacerbated by the current world geopolitical situation, it is hard to outline which dynamics, whether continuous or interrupted, will arise, stabilize or juxtapose. In any case, they will shape the future of Southern European cities, whether or not they contradict the neo-liberal logic prevailing in many metropolitan realities on a global scale.

³ While average expenditure on social security as a percentage of GDP remained stable between 2009 and 2020 for all EU countries (between 28% and 29%), it increased from 28% to 31.8% between 2019 and 2020: specifically, in Greece from 25.5% to 29.4%; in Spain from 24.1% to 29.9%; in Italy from 29.2% to 34.4%; in France from 33.4% to 38.1% (Eurostat 2020).

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