

# the italian changing cities

**emerging imbalances and conflicts**

edited by Antonio G. Calafati

the Italian  
changing  
cities

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Emerging Imbalances and Conflicts

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# **‘DIVERCITY’ AT STAKE UNDER PLANETARY URBANIZATION: THEORETICAL PITFALLS AND CHALLENGES TO THE ITALIAN CITIES**

Camilla Perrone, University of Florence

This contribution focuses on *DiverCity*, conceived as a key concept with which to analyse the current far-reaching change of urbanization processes strongly determined by an increasing number of immigrants bodily marking urban places – besides the enormous amount of intertwined flows and powers. This concept uses a ‘play on words’ between diversity and city, in which these two terms are understood as denoting entities with a one-to-one ontological interconnection. *DiverCity* is at the same time the bedrock of a ‘difference-sensitive’ planning, transformative and proactive, and the highly imaginative frontier at which to deal with multicultural planning enigmas that could open the doors to new planning potentialities. The concept is both unfolded in its urban nature (Perrone 2010) and stressed – under the presently debated *theory of planetary urbanization* – to such an extent that it implies a rethinking of the *urban* itself (Brenner, Schmidt, 2012).

As addressed by Neil Brenner (2013, p. 96), such theory asserts a shift from ‘concentrated urbanization’ (as the agglomeration of population, capital investment, and infrastructure in large clusters of settlement space) to ‘extended urbanization’ (as the processes of socio-spatial transformation that facilitate and result from urban development across places). It is also a shift from *urban* as ‘nominal essence’ (properties and/or spatial morphologies that are thought to be shared by all urban phenomena, conditions, or landscapes) to *urban* as ‘constitutive essence’ (the various processes through which the *urban* is produced – whether as phenomenon,



condition, or landscape).

The scientific framework in which this debate is placed has been recently intertwined with the discourse on how 'urban restructuring' and 'multi-scalar regional urbanization' processes, defined by Soja (2011) as 'post-metropolitan developments' (Soja 2011), are profoundly transforming the world's cities, reframing the concept of 'urban' and driving the metropolitan urbanization model to its end (beyond the rural/urban divide).

Such processes indeed affect different urban formations in different ways (as they have been defined by the literature over the past three decades): the monocentric metropolitan areas, polycentric metropolitan areas, territories characterized by settlement sprawl and dissemination, multipolar urban networks formed by cities that are at the same time interdependent and distinct. The uncertainty in the literature over the labels for these phenomena bears witness to the multitude of forms of post-metropolises (Polycentric Urban Region, Polycentric Metropolis, Mega-City Region, Polynuclear Urban Region, Polycentric Network, Edgeless City, Endless City, City-Region, Regional City, etc.) (Gillham, 2002; Hall and Pain, 2006; Keil, 2013; Kloosterman and Musterd 2001; Lang, 2003; Roy, 2009; Scott, 2001). At the same time it makes evident how such a multitude is disqualifying the common lexicons from rightly contributing to redefinition of the post-metropolitan account of urbanization.

There is evidence that the old categories need to be rephrased and re-signified. *Urban* and *diversity* are two of them. Accordingly, the paper investigates whether (or not) such shifts (concentrated/extended urbanization and metropolitan/postmetropolitan era) are affecting the concept of 'urban diversity' and how the latter should be rephrased in the face of the contemporary urbanization processes that pose a fundamental challenge to the entire field of urban studies. It might even be said that they call for a revision of the epistemological assumptions if they are to remain relevant to the massive transformations of worldwide socio-spatial organization. The reasoning will hence try to understand how the new perspective on the nature of such processes might lead to a different understanding of *diversity* as an urban feature (and/or city feature) while arguing on the meaning of *urban*. What is *urban* in the frame outlined under the theory of planetary urbanization?

To what extent does *urban* become more relational and extended – beyond the border of *urban* as it has been drawn by categories that emphasize? the urban/non-urban dialectic, such as 'city-regions', 'urban regions',

'metropolitan regions', and 'global city-regions'? Does it challenge the City itself as both a spatial entity and a social-spatial organization? To what extent does the concept stress the meaning of *diversity*? Then, could diversity be still considered a city feature? Should planners and scholars rethink the concept of *City*? Is it still useful to rely on *DiverCity* (understood as the outcome of a process producing and exchanging multiple, plural, interactive and experiential knowledge(s): Perrone, 2010) as a key concept with which to address a debate in contemporary urbanization processes? Following this sequence of hypothetical questions, the paper outlines some first implications in the theoretical discourse on diversity, which is still difficult to capture in its very essence. Drawing on the countless efforts to specify the multicultural essence of city-ness, the reasoning will build on Leonie Sandercock's seminal work (1997) that first addressed the topic in the planning field by focusing on the epistemology of multiplicity (and the role of cultural diversity) conceived as a cognitive method underpinning the planning of multicultural cities beyond the identity/difference divide. It asserts that what constitute the main ingredients of the concept of diversity are precisely the modes of knowledge (meant as the exchange of knowledges) and the forms of interaction and transaction (Friedmann, 1973 and 1987; Bentley and Dewey, 1946) between the communities and cultures correlated to such modes of knowledge. As such, it is also closely connected to the discourse on the epistemology of multiplicity, and Bhikhu Parekh's (2000) claim to recognise the interculturally-constituted aspects of a local society as constitutive categories of postmodern planning. Following such reasoning, also to be recalled is the debate on diversity as something related to differentiated forms of rationality, including experiential, intuitive and local knowledges based on practices of dialogue, listening, observation, contemplation and the sharing of knowledges expressed iconographically and in other symbolic, ritual and artistic manners (Bridge, 2005).

Therefore the goal in what follows is to present a convincing argument on contemporary urban diversity as a planning challenge to cope with the emerging urbanization processes with a specific focus on Italian cities.

The *very nature of the contemporary urban Italian landscapes* is strongly affected and determined by intertwined and not simply untangled processes. History, urban and territorial heritages, patterns of settlement, development models: all of these features make cities dynamic and at the same time unique places in which to live when compared to each

other and to other European cities. Profiling the changing nature of such components, even in a comparative manner which implies a selection of levels of comparability, might be an utopian enterprise.

What all the Italian cities share – as much as do the other cities in the world – is an account of diversity that affects and marks cities' shapes, patterns, landscapes, people and architectures.

In a period of 'revolution' understood as epochal change in the very nature of the urbanization process all over the planet, it seems interesting to assume 'diversity' as a key issue for planning practice and theory. On the other hand, the challenge of *urban* as something to be re-conceptualized amid planetary urbanization, raises new issues in the analytical frames of cities as changing domains.

Drawing on some cases described as processes of transformation of socio-spatial organization affecting Italian cities and urban region, the paper focuses on such dilemmas in order to define the concept of diversity better. It will stress the conceptual couple '*DiverCity vs. urban diversity*' beyond the border of what could still be considered as *City*, highlighting some lines of theoretical work.

The paper will provide a sort of *taxonomy* of urban spaces defined as diversity-based. At least five kinds of urban processes can be identified as featuring components of Italian diverse cities:

- stigmatized concentrated ethnic neighborhoods (such as Prato's Chinatown, Italy);
- social mixing in the historic city centers (medium sized town, North Italy);
- 'multicultural social-spatial sprawl' in the periurban areas (Osmannoro, Firenze);
- multicultural rural areas (South Italy);
- 'diversity-based urban spaces' as key component of the contemporary urbanization processes.

With the reasoning conducted from a place-based perspective, the focus will be on the *agency of urban spaces* and their potential to provide a range of diversity conceived as a variety of opportunities for any kind of user and place maker. The aim will be to suggest *critical planning and design issues* and spatial policy inputs while arguing on contemporary theories concerning urbanization processes (Keil, 2013; Soja, 2011).

The overall argument presented in the paper is a contribution to an Italian

Research Project titled *Post-metropolitan territories as emergent forms of urban space: coping with sustainability, habitability, and governance* undertaken by some Italian universities, such as the Polytechnic of Milan (as coordinator) and the University of Florence (of which the author is a member), and international institutions such as the City Institute at the York University of Toronto; the CRESR at the Hallam University of Sheffield UK, the Geographisches Institut at the Tuebingen University, and some others. The contribution made by the Florence Unit is divided into two parts. The first part concerns the analysis of the superseding of the metropolis form and the processes of 'multiscalar regional urbanization'; the definition of a new interpretative paradigm called the 'new regional city' meant both as a tool to describe the transformations underway and as a project scenario. The second part, closely linked to the Horizon 2020 research topics, concerns study of the theory and methodology of the concepts of resilience, diversity and well-being and their conversion into analysis and project tools. Within this frame the concept of diversity (and the connected concept of inclusiveness) is understood as a constitutive element of the project, according to a difference-sensitive planning model. It includes attention to the role of cultures and different lifestyles in the construction of new territories meant as hospitable places adaptable to the requirements of the New Regional City's inhabitants.

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Under the pressure of a complex configuration of interdependent factors – economic, demographic, technological, institutional and cultural – Italian cities are experiencing profound structural changes. The heterogeneity of the Italian urban system makes this process highly place-specific. The structure (and size) of the Italian cities, the rationality of their political-administrative elite, their resistance and resilience capacity, and the shocks hitting them are very different. Consequently, the adjustment strategy that cities will implement and the development trajectories that they will follow may be expected to be rather different as well. The Italian urban landscape will undergo a profound transformation in the next decade and beyond.

There is a manifest ‘lack of knowledge’ about the on-going process of Italian cities’ structural changes, and it has straightforward negative implications concerning the capacity of local and national policy makers to forecast cities’ future development trajectories and to design appropriate regulation policies. This collection of papers – presented at the workshop “The Changing Italian Cities. Emerging Imbalances and Conflicts” (L’Aquila, 10-11 December 2013) – is the first, preliminary result of a research programme in progress at the Gran Sasso Science Institute on the state and potential evolution of the Italian urban system. The papers explore structural changes in Italian cities from an interdisciplinary perspective, conducting empirical investigation and field studies focused on long-term trends and the policy challenges that they raise.

