

the italian changing cities

emerging imbalances and conflicts

edited by Antonio G. Calafati

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© The Changing Italian Cities:
Emerging Imbalances and Conflicts

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Antonio G. Calafati

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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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Sandra Annunziata has a PhD in Urban Studies, gained in 2008 at the University of Roma Tre, where she has also been postdoctoral researcher on 'Urbanities and Conflicts in the Neoliberal City' and currently on 'Immigrant and Social Cohesion in Small Municipalities'. She is the recipient of a Marie Curie fellowship for a research project on 'Anti-Gentrification Practices and Policies in Southern European Cities', which will be hosted at the University of Leicester, UK, starting in winter 2014. She has taught/is teaching European Cities on the Cornell University Rome Program, and Urbanism at the University of Roma Tre. Her fields of research are European urbanism, urban policies, gentrification and housing.

Simonetta Armondi graduated in Architecture at Venice University (IUAV). She holds a PhD and a master in Environmental and Territorial Planning from the Polytechnic of Milan, where she is involved in research on changing productive settlements, contemporary spatial patterns, and urban and territorial policies (Department of Architecture and Urban Studies). She has conducted research on project strategies in territorial and urban policies within EU-funded programmes, and she works on research projects concerning evaluation programmes at the regional and national level. She teaches Urban Planning and Policies at the Polytechnic of Milan (bachelor degree course in Planning).

Angelo Besana has a PhD in Urban and Regional Geography. He is currently Assistant Professor of Economic and Political Geography at the Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban studies and Planning (DIST), Polytechnic and University of Turin. He teaches a course on Geographical Information Systems and Territorial Development, and his research interests are applied geography, spatial development and GIS applications.

David Burgalassi. An economist at Tuscany's Regional Institute for Economic Planning (Florence, Italy), Local Development Division, he has written several papers on topics concerning regional and environmental economics. He holds a Master of Science in Spatial Economics from the Free University of Amsterdam (Netherlands) and he is currently PhD candidate in Economics at the University of Pisa.

Antonio G. Calafati. Associate Professor of Applied Economics at the Marche Polytechnic University (Italy), he teaches Urban Economics at the Academy of Architecture of Mendrisio (Switzerland). Previously he taught at the University of Macerata (Italy) and at the Friedrich Schiller University of Jena (Germany). He has published *Economie in cerca di città. La questione urbana in Italia* (Donzelli, 2009) and edited the book *Le città della Terza Italia* (Franco Angeli, 2012).

Adriano Cancellieri. Urban Sociologist at the University IUAV of Venice and member of the SSIIM UNESCO Chair 'Social and Spatial Inclusion of International Migrants' (www.unescochair-iuav.it). Previously he worked at the University of Padua and was a researcher in European projects ('Wave Project: Welfare and Values in Europe' – 6th framework 2006-2009) and at several public and private institutions, such as Dossier Caritas Roma and LaPolis (University of Urbino). He is a co-founder of 'Tracce Urbane/Urban Traces. Social scientists and planners in dialogue', a network of young urban scholars. He has published *Hotel House. Etnografia di un condominio multietnico* (Professionaldreamers, 2013) and co-edited with Giuseppe Scandurra *Tracce urbane. Alla ricerca della città* (Franco Angeli, 2012).

Francesco Chiodelli. PhD in Urban Policies and Projects at the Milan Polytechnic, he is currently research fellow at GSSI. He is interested in a range of topics, all of which fall within the broad categories of planning theory, urban conflicts, and the relation between space regulation and relevant ethical issues (such as pluralism and tolerance in public and private spaces). His papers have appeared in international journals such as *Planning Theory*, *Geoforum*, *Cities*, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *Planning Perspectives*, *Urban Research and Practice*, *Jerusalem Quarterly*. He has published *Gerusalemme Contesa. Dimensioni urbane di un conflitto* (Carocci, 2012) and co-edited *Cities to be tamed? Spatial Investigations Across the Urban South* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

Alessandro Coppola. PhD from University of Roma III-Urban Studies Department. Currently, he has lectureships at the Polytechnic of Milan and at the Institute for the Education of Students in Rome. He has been a visiting scholar at several US universities. In his research he has addressed various issues in the field of urban studies: urban crisis and decline, neighbourhood and urban policies, urban policy in the United States and Europe. His most recent book is *Apocalypse town: cronache dalla fine della civiltà urbana* (Laterza, 2012).

Marco Cremaschi teaches urban policies at the Department of Urban Studies, University Rome Tre. He is the president of Planum, a network publishing the *European Journal of Urbanism* online (www.planum.net). Among his books are *Changing Places, Urbanity, Citizenship, and Ideology in new European neighborhoods* (with F. Eckardt, Techne, 2011), *Policies, Cities and Innovation, Regions between rhetoric and change* (Donzelli, 2009), *Traces of neighborhoods, Social bonds in a changing city* (Franco Angeli, 2008).

Ferdinando Fava. is an urban anthropologist and research fellow at the Laboratoire Architecture Anthropologie (LAA) He studied urban sociology at the University of California, Berkeley and completed his PhD at the Ecole des Hautes

Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. He teaches Cultural Anthropology at the University of Padova, and is guest professor at various universities in France, the Netherlands, Brazil, Cuba and Argentina. He has published extensively in French and Italian on a public housing project in the economically deprived Zona Espansione Nord (ZEN) of Palermo, and his work addresses larger epistemological issues of social exclusion in urban areas.

Chiara Lucchini, architect, has a PhD in Territorial Policies, IUAV University of Venice. She has been a research fellow at the Department of Architecture and Design of the Turin Polytechnic, and teaching assistant in urban design and planning at the Turin Polytechnic since 2006. She has been part of the Metropolitan Turin Urban Center project staff since 2007.

Camilla Perrone is Assistant Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Florence. Her concurrent appointments include Founding Director of the Research Laboratory of Critical Planning and Design, and Coordinator of the PhD Programme. She has published articles and books on spatial planning, participatory design, and urban policies for managing diversity. Recent publications: *Giochi di potere. Partecipazione, piani e politiche territoriali* (Utet, 2013; co-edited with M. Morisi); *Everyday Life in the Segmented City* (Research in Urban Sociology, Vol. 11/2011; co-edited with G. Manella and L. Tripodi); *DiverCity. Conoscenza, pianificazione, città delle differenze* (FrancoAngeli, 2010).

Elisabetta Rosa is an architect and has a PhD in Territorial Planning and Local Development (Polytechnic of Turin). Her research focuses on illegal settlements and urban marginality issues, particularly in Italian and southern European cities. In 2013 She was visiting researcher at the University of Tours with a postdoctoral fellowship awarded by the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris.

Carlo Salone is Associate Professor of Regional Geography of Development and Territorial Development at the University of Turin. He has taught as a visiting lecturer in France (Paris 10), Spain (Girona, Doctoral School of Geography and Planning) and Finland (Oulu, Doctoral School of Geography), and he is currently visiting professor at the UPEC, Paris, and Université Lyon 3, 'Lumière'. Until 2012 he was also director of Eu-Polis, a research institute within the Interuniversity Department of Urban and Regional Studies and Planning, University and Polytechnic of Turin.

Giuseppe Scandurra teaches Cultural Anthropology at the Department of Humanities - University of Ferrara. He has published numerous essays and books on the subject of urban anthropology. Among his most recent publications

are *Tranvieri. Etnografia di una palestra di pugilato* (with F. Antonelli, Aracne 2010), *Memorie di uno spazio pubblico. Piazza Verdi a Bologna* (with E. Castelli, L. Tancredi and A. Tolomelli, Clueb 2011), *Tracce Urbane* (with A. Cancellieri, Franco Angeli 2012) and *Antropologia e Studi Urbani* (Este Edition 2013). He is currently conducting research on a group of supporters of the Bologna football team, and an ethnographic study on the relationship between the 'Arab Spring' and the art world in Tunisia. He is a member of the Scientific Committee of the Gramsci Institute Emilia-Romagna and of the trans-disciplinary study group 'Tracce Urbane' (www.tracceurbane.professionaldreamers.net) and Director of the Laboratory of Urban Studies - University of Ferrara (<http://sea.unife.it/lisu/>)

Paolo Veneri is an economist at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). He carries out research on several topics related to urban and regional economics, including urban spatial structure, measurement of well-being, rural-urban relationships and spatial identification of metropolitan areas. He is the author of a recently published OECD report "*Rural-urban partnership: an integrated approach to economic development*". He holds a PhD in Economics from the Marche Polytechnic University (Italy), and he has been a research fellow at the Autònoma University of Barcelona (Spain) and at the Free University of Amsterdam (Netherlands).

Federico Zanfi. Architect Ph.D., research fellow at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies at the Polytechnic of Milan. His research focuses on "post-growth" transformations in Italian urban contexts, with particular emphasis on illegal settlements in Italy's South, diffuse urbanization in central-northern regions, and middle-class housing in the main metropolitan centres. On these issues he has published *Città latenti. Un progetto per l'Italia abusiva* (Bruno Mondadori, 2008), *Quando l'autostrada non basta. Infrastrutture, paesaggio e urbanistica nel territorio pedemontano* (with A. Lanzani and others, Quodlibet, 2013) and *Storie di case. Abitare l'Italia del boom* (with F. De Pieri, B. Bonomo and G. Caramellino, Donzelli, 2013).

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.

