Identity, Change and Sustainability: Towards Post-Mediterranean Cities?

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Abstract

Going beyond the traditional Mediterranean discourses centered on economic backwardness and social secularism, an interpretation of southern urbanities was proposed in the present study as related to local governance, weak urban planning and peculiar socio-demographic spatial structures. By discussing the weak strategies to reduce regional disparities and the failed opportunities to promote the scenic and cultural heritage of peri-urban areas, an interpretative framework to the long-term dynamics of expanding Mediterranean cities was illustrated as applicable to other urban areas with similar morphological and functional characteristics. The proposed framework is based on the analysis of ecologically-fragile and socially-unstable Mediterranean contexts in view of the persistence of a structural crisis affecting the economic base, the institutions and the governance system. The article concludes with a discussion on future development paths of the Mediterranean cities, stressing important divergences in the short term and the common destiny in the long run.

Keywords: Urban planning, Informality, Sustainable development, Competitiveness, Mediterranean

Introduction

While proposing a radical change in dualistic concepts such as 'center' *vs* 'periphery' or 'local' *vs* 'global', the 'Mediterranean city' paradigm was sometimes interpreted as a critical reference to the Anglo-American urban models (Minca 2004). The debate on the Mediterranean city, however, cannot be separated from the general debate on Mediterranean peculiarities (Minca 2004). Elusive definitions, ambiguous concepts, fragmented histories, different cultures and contrasting institutional systems make the reflection on how to identify the Mediterranean region quite hard (Matvejevic 1996, 1998). The awareness of being at a starting point in the interpretation of an evanescent concept like the 'Mediterranean urbanity' makes the search for definitions more confusing and imprecise. According to Conti and Segre (1998), a comprehensive definition for the Mediterranean region would represent something like 'an act of confidence in the existence of a Mediterranean scale' appropriate to the analysis of its social traits and capable to identify physical boundaries designed to contain homogeneous phenomena and processes. In this view, Mediterranean urbanization emerges as a complex process based on flexible concepts, whose territorial extensions vary according to the discipline's perspective (Vaiou 2004). This rationale adds to the ultimate goal of the present study that is, the development of an alternative view of Mediterranean urban development based on a thorough tribute to evocative interpretations contrasting the dominant Anglophone paradigm (e.g. Leontidou 1990, 1993).

'Southern' interpretations of Mediterranean urbanity criticized reductionist approaches by (i) proposing a reflection on the need for novel assessment frameworks based on the peculiar characteristics of these urban systems, (ii) rejecting deterministic interpretations based on 'convergence' paradigms, (iii) accepting a critical review of the uneven gap between socio-cultural and economic systems and, finally, (iv) opening up the discussion to additional (e.g. territorial, environmental, socio-ecological) components of the development debate (Leontidou 2003, Minca 2004, among others). Despite the undoubted transition of several Mediterranean cities to more 'conventional' and 'mature' urban models grounded into globalism, competitiveness and leadership, such an interpretation maintains much of its applicability in times of crisis. A good way to summarize this line of thought is to refer to the Mediterranean region as a nebula consisting of a series of virtual networks that connects information, people, services and goods with a number of places and nodes, which in turn interact with this (only apparently) ephemeral dimension in a seemingly unpredictable way (Minca 2003).

While remaining trapped into linear logical schemes when approaching space (Vaiou 1997), the critical reference to the schematic approaches typical of positivist interpretations reflects the geometrical relationships between society and territory going beyond the mere quantification of development. Such a criticism allows recognizing that ambiguity and poetic geometry represent the Mediterranean better than the social weakness and the economic backwardness transpiring from statistics and official reports (Minca 2004). While Mediterranean spaces are usually regarded as 'weak', 'marginal' and 'poorly competitive', there are inherent difficulties to define them only according to a spatial logic based on binary criteria of inclusion/exclusion and a 'linear' framework prevailing until now. Disciplinary marginalization and the exclusion from mainstream discourses are sometimes supported by linear approaches and merely quantitative perspectives proposed by a classical 'reductionist' framework. Analysis exclusively based on classical theories proposed by the mainstream literature on developed and competitive urban systems in Europe and the United States could hide latent (but relevant) phenomena with relevance for the study of Mediterranean urbanities (Kayser 1996).

Interpretative frameworks grounded on mixed narrative and quantitative approaches should be particularly meaningful to Mediterranean urban studies. Following Minca (2004), we cannot refer to the Mediterranean region as a homogeneous and distinct space, while dealing with narratives, metaphors and discourses on a boundary-less, permeable space (Matvejevic 1996). On the one hand, the role of statistical data and indicators to understanding the main functional and morphological characters of southern urbanity should be acknowledged. On the other hand, narratives, metaphors, discourses and story-lines are increasingly needed to describe complexity of Mediterranean urban systems because data and statistics explore the socio-cultural and political latent factors only partially. Based on these premises, the present contribution proposes an alternative interpretation of the 'Mediterranean city' concept in the light of recent criticisms to the traditional urban paradigm grounded *e.g.* on 'global city regions' (Scott 2001). By focusing on the discussion about the intimate nexus between urban form and functions, this contribution contrasts the metaphorical and 'romantic' vision that has characterized the debate on Mediterranean urbanity (Braudel 1987).

Back to the 'Mediterranean city'?

By abandoning the stiffness of deterministic constructs, Mediterranean discourses imagine an heterotopic space, a utopia in progress, embraced in charming spaces that produce order and the conditions for its deconstruction (Minca 2004). Just thinking about the Mediterranean sea as heterotopia, you can give substance to a definition substantially unaffected by determinism and functionalism (Farinelli 1998). Concentrating on the sea, southern European urban studies focus on coastal areas, seen as the result of deregulated settlement expansion (Giannakourou 2005). Cities interrupt the (only supposed) homogeneity of rural landscapes by introducing a 'jump scale' which is not linked to demographic and economic disparities only, but reflects an intimately-polarized land-use structure.

The Mediterranean basin is then reflected in something like a 'geography of the fracture' (Kayser 1996), which distinguishes between developed, emerging and disadvantaged areas, contrasting the strength of commercial and industrial cities with the weakness of rural landscapes. This deterministic view finds only partial confirmation in the geography of transition from compact and mono-centric systems towards increasingly polycentric models (Davoudi 2003, Hall and Pain 2006). With their unstable role in the economic global systems, the unresolved environmental issues, the sharp regional disparities, the increased social instability (Deffontaines 1972), the international performance of Mediterranean countries reflects their 'peripheral' world status (Economou 1997). Farinelli (1998) debated on the definition of the 'peripheral' Mediterranean as an area of political turbulence, economic and social instability, secularism and religious traditionalism. These categories can be still applied - without substantial differences with the past - to the actual crisis' period.

The economic backwardness of the Mediterranean region compared to developed counterparts was thorough discussed by Leontidou (1993), Farinelli (1998), Minca (2004) and others, who have questioned the metaphorical meaning of backwardness, replacing it with 'other modernity', a concept that should be assessed not only using strictly quantitative criteria. By introducing the evocative concept of 'resistance to modernity', they express a critique to the dominant Anglo-American culture in forms of veiled impatience with rules, identity and objective criteria specific of the 'northern' contexts (Leontidou 1993). The weakness of positivist definitions emerges from these contributions. Minca says that the Mediterranean lends very little to the 'reductio ad unum' of mechanistic metaphors, while calling upon scholars on narrative spaces, borders and horizons.

By exceeding the ordered patterns of the European identity, we need to re-interpret the conditions of Mediterranean periphery. This does not mean searching for other definitions, measurements and concepts, but obliges to put back the centrality of territories, local communities and economic systems in the cultural and political agenda (LeGates and Stout 1996).

On the other hand, the Mediterranean region has partially regained, in the last decade, the cultural role of cities as a bridge between Europe, Africa and the Middle East. The post-crisis economic scenarios and the global geo-political uncertainty may contribute to the redefinition of Mediterranean urban centrality. Some regions, especially those most open to trade, have strengthen the productive network and increase competitiveness in the international arena. Developmental policies consolidated the economic power of Mediterranean cities (Salvatori 2008) leading the economic, social and cultural structures of each country. Nowadays Mediterranean cities are trying to recreate the charm and atmosphere that attract tourists from all over, looking for an image which is pleasant, efficient, alive, plenty of history and culture. Most of these cities, in line with the opportunities opened by globalization, is gearing up for a long time trying to consolidate or improve their position in the continental urban hierarchy (Beriatos and Gospodini 2004).

Searching for New Definitions of Southern Urbanity

In order to search for a new definition of centrality for Mediterranean urban systems, we should continue to be fascinated by the 'similarities of the Mediterranean' (Minca, 2003), being aware that the system of specificity and uniqueness that every Mediterranean region offers, is the key territorial value of this land. The internationally-recognized niche in tourism, culture and management of great events are the elements through which the socioeconomic power of cities consolidates (Delladetsima 2006). The belief in the existence of a kind of Mediterranean universalism, the celebration of a Latin root or a Mediterranean identity clashes with this vision. However, while referring back to the concept of a unique northern Mediterranean region, the large euro-Mediterranean strategy, until the Barcelona Declaration in 1995, has not yet led to the sharing of best practices in vast fields of politics, institutions and society. On the one hand, eastern and southern Mediterranean countries remain too peripheral to this strategy. On the other hand, European Mediterranean countries, with their regional and national frameworks, struggled to blend to a 'northern' center of the global dynamics. Despite divisions, territorial fractures and the apparent marginalization from the great visions of the English-speaking geopolitics, following Minca's (2004) discourse on Mediterranean centrality, southern Europe remains an indispensable reference in development strategies, a contact person who speaks a poor English, but also a reference necessary to maintain the centrality of the north, while mitigating its 'single thought'.

The rapid growth of the population was the key trait of the development of Mediterranean cities. The determinants of urban growth observed at least until the 1990s along the north bank and still found on the south bank are summarized by Ludlow (1994). The process of urbanization, driven by rural transformations and powered by land development policies determined the disproportionate growth of urban areas. Population growth has placed the Mediterranean urban regions in front of new crucial issues, including the environmental implications of this massive rural exodus. Peri-urban areas, coasts and uplands were the areas of higher population growth in Italy as in Israel, in Spain as in Turkey, in Greece as in Morocco (Ribeiro 1972).

The decline of centrality observed for some Mediterranean cities since the sixteenth century was driven by the progressive shifting of commercial, productive, social and cultural networks towards north America, northern Europe and the middle East. Nonetheless, the uneven centrality of the Mediterranean in the global tourism resists the onslaught of time, being threatened by territorial disparities, flawed by structural gaps in infrastructure, accommodation and environmental impacts. These are due to the concentration of the local infrastructure in few development nodes, the (low) quality of human capital employed, the lack of alternative and innovative tourism policies (Troin 1997).

The ecological problems related to spontaneous urbanization combined with those dictated by the rapid transformation of agricultural land into urban spaces (Figure 1). These landscapes are ecologically-vulnerable and exposed to environmental impacts which can lead to spirals powered to deforestation, desertification and the irreversible degradation of the natural capital (Kayser 1996). Combined with the demographic transition and the undeniable cultural change, the shift of production from industrial economy to the tertiary sector is another typical feature of Mediterranean urban evolution. This transformation *per se* is not the only characteristic of the Mediterranean basin.

It should be better discussing what direction this phenomenon is taking in the southern European cities. In particular, what will be the importance of the advanced tertiary sector (which is increasingly viewed as a proxy of urban competitiveness) in the local economic systems, is a key question that should be addressed comparatively in selected Mediterranean case studies.

The partial failure of development policies towards modernization, competitiveness and the revitalization of the Central Business District, played a key role in spontaneous urban growth. Mediterranean informality, in fact, expresses a duality based on the recognition of the role of market and capital and the refuse of the state control on such dynamics. Following Pace (1996), the informal sector, rather than the legal economy, becomes the rule. This pattern does not allow the emergence of a strong middle class and produces workers in the informal sector replacing the proletariat class. The late industrialization highlights the absence of a 'bourgeois hegemony', but also the diversity, versatility and uniqueness of Mediterranean societies. A typical element of spontaneity is given by unauthorized construction and planning de-regulation. Informality is the most significant element of an urban model in which the boundary between law and spontaneity assumes jagged shapes and in which the connection between formal and informal activities is almost ubiquitous. The basis of social control that allows such contamination is the supremacy of the family on the state, fronting the particular interest to the common good (Tsoulouvis 1996).

Figure 1: The Uneven Mediterranean Urban Expansion: Deregulated Growth in Naples' Periphery (Left) and Compact Development along Main Roads in Barcelona's Ring (Source: Author's Photographs)
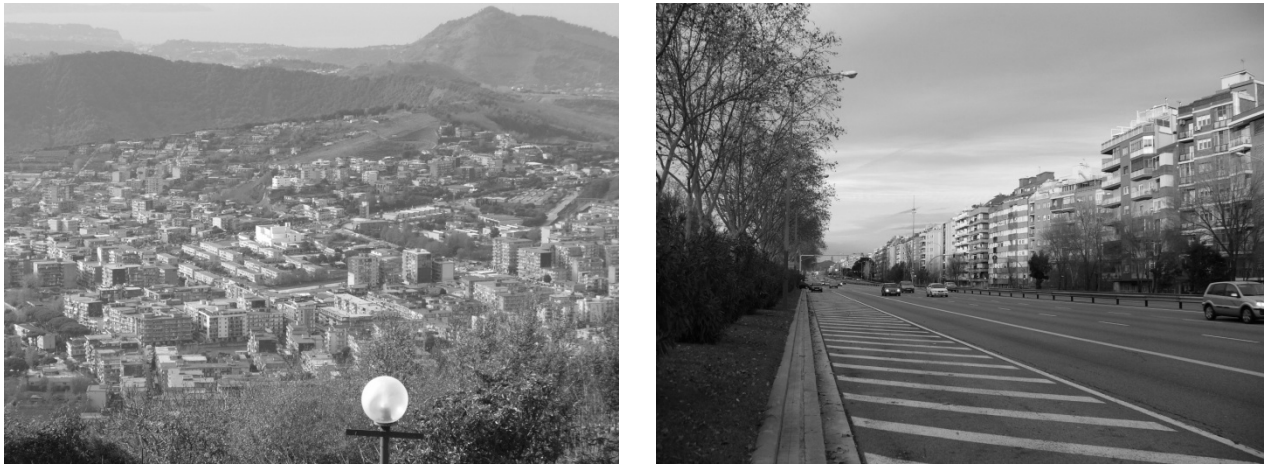
Mediterranean Keywords

Based on these considerations, some keywords for Mediterranean urban studies are proposed in the following. The scale of urban phenomena was taken as a reasonable distinction mark: urban contexts, regional patterns and national/international dimensions are the factors on which a brief analysis of the Mediterranean city can be articulated. For each of these levels, specific research dimensions can be emphasized (Table 1). The morphological and functional characteristics of cities, including form, demographic trends, horizontal and vertical segregation are considered together with the role of cultural events in promoting urban competitiveness, sustainable planning, 'creative' models (Scott 2001).

In the regional dimension, we have brought the discussion on the transition from the compact city to the sprawling region, highlighting the (evolving) relationship between urban and rural areas. Sprawl, considered as the most typical urban process in recent times, is framed into a perspective of polycentric development, in which sustainable resource management and planning incorporate strategic decision spaces. The analysis carried out at the national scale highlights the peculiarities of the main southern urban systems based on the concept of 'city-state' (Benevolo 1990). Mediterranean urbanization was also seen as the product of 'coastalization', which is in part linked to peri-urbanization processes. A discussion on the international role of the Mediterranean cities completes the proposed framework. It means underlining the commitment of many urban areas in a process of convergence towards competitive, equitable and sustainable development, far away from the *cliché* of backwardness, spontaneity and illegality (Maloutas and Karadimitriou 2001).

Table 1. Selected Key Words for Mediterranean Urban Studies

Scale			
Urban	Regional	National	International
Form	Transition	Governance	Ranking
Cycle	Contrasts	System	Convergence
Segregation	Diffusion	Opportunity	Competition
Creativity	Planning	Polycentricism	Synergy
Events			

Beyond the City, Outside the City - Towards a Renewed Interest in the Mediterranean Urban Regions?

Urban studies were and are attracted by the peculiarities of the southern cities. After twenty years from Leontidou (1990) seminal book entitled 'The Mediterranean city in transition', two Olympics passed through Mediterranean Europe, Barcelona 1992 and Athens 2004, Lisbon held the Expo 1998, Rome hosted the Great Jubilee in 2000, Valencia and Salonika turned on with the American's cup and the year of culture, just to provide few examples. While Barcelona was elected as the coolest city in Europe, the renewed interest for Mediterranean urbanities has been crystallized in an increased number of publications, conferences and public events organized from different disciplinary and cultural perspectives. Cities such as Barcelona, Istanbul, Athens, Lisbon, Madrid, Seville, Salonika, Valencia and - perhaps more in the background - Rome and Naples, have been re-considered as paradigmatic cases due to their morphological and functional uniqueness in the European panorama. Empirical studies re-contextualized the different southern European urban paths suspended between planning and informality (Benevolo 1990, Kourliouros 1997, Dal Pozzolo 2002, Coccossis et al. 2005).

The renewed interest towards the Mediterranean cities is due to the recognition of this region as the cradle of an advanced civilization and cultural tradition based on the well-established 'astifilia' discussed by Leontidou (1993). In fact, the search for a unique taxonomy of the Mediterranean cities has fascinated many scholars. If we assume urban context as a benchmark, choosing specific variable targets, the comparison with the 'urban north' might have some usefulness. However, interpreting the 'urban north' as the 'best practice' model in the field of architecture, planning and the economy, may be dangerous, even if widely practiced (Pace 1996). Forcing the Mediterranean region to become a 'certified copy' of the north was a diffused temptation, denying cultural traditions, unique urban landscapes and traditional social practices (Muscarà 1986).

In this direction, the 'Mediterranean urban paradigm' developed in a variety of combinations of tradition and post-modernism distanced from a linear interpretation of the relationship between northern and southern urbanities (Leontidou 1996). The contribution of Greek, Spanish and Portuguese scholars together with some voices representative from Italy and other contributions from southern Mediterranean countries, was significant and still echoes in urban studies at the end of the twentieth century. 'Alternative to Modernism in (southern) urban theory', 'Postmodernism and the City: Mediterranean versions', 'A Mediterranean city through the Ages', were just some of the running titles of well known studies dealing with Mediterranean urbanity.

An element of the current debate is linked to the concept of post-modernity expressed by the Mediterranean city, a condition that Leontidou (1993) labels as a 'reaction to modernity'. This condition has led to a new modernity, interpreted as a cultural alternative to the traditional modernism, reflected in the criticism to the European centralism and the 'one-way' vision typical of the American world. The transition to the new millennium has brought, on the one hand, to a renewed awareness of urban Mediterranean issues, thanks to an ongoing systematization of concepts and urban taxonomies (Figure 2). On the other hand, recent years have also claimed to a reorientation of the disciplinary debate to new currents of thought, more oriented to polycentric models. The shift towards a more balanced development was also influenced by the literature on the organization and evolution of 'global city regions' (Scott 2001), taken as an example of modernity, efficiency and competitiveness. The 'creative city' paradigm contributed further to the emergence of alternative lines of interpretation to the classical framework representing Mediterranean city regions as traditional, stereotypical and economically-locked.

Figure 2: New Taxonomies for the Mediterranean City: Athens as 'Islands of Difference' (Source: Author's Photograph)

While being morphologically different from the 'global city-regions' described by the Anglophone literature (e.g. Tumpel-Gugerell and Mooslechner 2003), the Mediterranean protagonists of immature polycentric models are promising references for future studies on southern urban development. How the Mediterranean cities are part of this new debate and how their urban regions comply with the current urban trends in 'northern' countries have been the subjects of recent studies. Convergence or divergence, adaptation or resilience, are the new trends to be investigated from various points of view (Longhi and Musolesi 2007). Questions on the future of the Mediterranean cities are still open, scenarios on the development of their urban regions in view of the global market are still fluid. Architectural landmarks, cultural events, shared planning practices contribute only partly to answer these complex questions.

To conclude, the 'Mediterranean city' cannot be intended as a formal paradigm of analysis, but a necessary point of distinction in the comparative analysis of different urban trajectories, in a context of regional heterogeneity and urban specificity (Balta 1992). To this end, the comparison between cities, regions, urban systems in order to identify archetypes of the 'Mediterranean' traits is functional to a more conscious definition of the 'Mediterranean city' concept. This clearly passes through a range of possible alternative trajectories, based on theoretical and empirical criteria grounded on both quantitative and qualitative assets (Minca 2004).

The choice of typical characters identifying the Mediterranean city was therefore developed through both the morphological analysis of settlement (focusing on city's shape, the relationship between compactness and density, urban growth dynamics over time and space) and functional aspects, including the demographic characteristics of the resident population, employment profile and the characteristics of the local labor market, income and consumption patterns as well as social segregation.

For example, the concept of peri-urbanization takes on new perspectives of analysis in the Mediterranean cities compared to the already well-established 'northern' literature. The Mediterranean city is crystallized in the 'lock living' concept proposed by Munoz (2003) who illustrates the development of Barcelona's fringe based on the evolution of urban lifestyles and consumption.

The author interprets social changes in peri-urban Barcelona in relation with settlement's sprawl dominated by detached villas with swimming pools surrounded by hyper-controlled and almost fortified green estates.

This adhere to a sense of understanding the suburban landscape that closely resembles the North American fringe, with low-density settlements physically disconnected from the city center (Vicino et al. 2007). At the same time, the Mediterranean cities still alive in the 'metropolis in continuous transition' described by Leontidou (1995). After qualifying the pre-Olympics Athens sprawl as a category of spontaneity *à la* Gramsci, Leontidou grounded the sprawl dimension within a 'social tension' context perhaps unique in Europe. A path that distinguishes, in her view, the Mediterranean city from the developed northern regions but also from agglomerations of the World South, still experiencing a lack of development that never seems to be filled.

However, we cannot deny that in recent years several European Mediterranean cities have shown signs of convergence towards expansion models typical of their northern counterparts (European Environment Agency 2006). Based on these considerations, questions that need an in-depth answer could be: (i) Will southern European cities retain their distinctive historical centers by intercepting tourist flows and attracting residents' flows, or will they continue losing population, by recalling new commuter flows and immigration? Will they converge towards more balanced and sustainable models by addressing the socioeconomic polarization of peri-urban areas? Will they continue invading the surrounding open spaces by considering them as 'urban voids' even with historical, cultural and ecological heritage?

Conclusions

The development of the Mediterranean cities was often considered as a powerful factor in the formation of regional imbalances. Economic polarization and the abnormal concentration of activities in urban areas combined with rapid population growth, have caused significant disparities with the inner regions that revealed not capable to adapt to these transitions. The emergence of externalities with regard to infrastructures, human and financial capital and investments has led to major environmental imbalances, natural resource depletion, habitat fragmentation and a generalized loss of biodiversity. The marked imbalance in spatial planning between northern and southern regions continues to exert its influence on peripheral areas. The environmental fragility of these areas was initially addressed through approaches based on weak technical actions and poor participatory processes. More recently, the spread of co-operative approaches promoted an active involvement of stakeholders working at various geographical scales.

The convergence of southern European countries towards structural policies for the environment have given rise to a 'cultural transition' (Fuschi 2008) that has been expressed, for example, in the initiatives of Local Agenda 21. However, many issues still remain open including the rapid loss of agricultural land and semi-natural, high-value ecological landscapes, soil deterioration and desertification, regional climate change, just to provide key examples. The promotion of a common environmental framework in the Mediterranean basin should reconcile the different approaches between the 'European' arc, with priority intervention related to the transport sector, air pollution, waste management and urban regeneration, and the southern arc, needing urgent development policies together with the stabilization of migration flows.

Ambitious goals could be achieved in the construction of a common platform for the management of coastal areas and peri-urban regions as well as for the promotion of a multi-functional agriculture that acts as a brake to urban sprawl and to the deterioration of cultural landscapes. Networking, exchange of experiences and expertise, sharing common objectives, appear valuable tools in the management of specific problems, such as the development of illegal suburbs, waste management and the recovery of abandoned industrial spaces. In summary, the new 'Mediterranean city' concept can be expressed in the convergence of urban policies that contribute jointly to the quality of architecture, urban spaces and natural environment (Zuindeau 2007). Only a multi-dimensional planning strategy can effectively contribute to the development of southern cities in a time of crisis.

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