

WAS THE MEDITERRANEAN CITY CONDEMNED TO LAGGING BEHIND?

PAOLO PERULLI

University of Eastern Piedmont, Italy

Was it the sudden change towards a completely new kind of economy that took place in the 19th century (Polanyi) that made the Mediterranean city obsolete? Or was it the shift from city-states to nation-states beginning in the 16th century and coinciding with a southern-northern European divide that was destined to favor northern Europe? This process began with the reduced scope of Florence, Genoa, Venice, and other Mediterranean cities at the beginning of the New Market era. Whereas in the past the commerce of Hamburg, Venice, or Lyon was not at all “German,” “Italian,” or “French” but was city commerce, in the New Market Era a top-down process took place that made national markets the new political creation of modernity. In fact, the long distance markets were the engines of the entire process, driving together merchants, cities, territorial powers, and ultimately the State. As Montesquieu stated, “The English constrain the merchant, but it is in favour of commerce.”

The obsolescence of Mediterranean city was not denied but simply postponed by Braudel to the second half of the 17th century. However, Milan, Marseille, and Barcelona are Mediterranean cities that have experienced long-lasting economic success.

The Weberian idea of a religious-normative content guiding the early capitalist formations in Northern Europe leaves the Mediterranean city stuck in the past. But by looking at other important aspects of city development a different story can be told: Mediterranean cities show the persistence of “visions” that have given form to urban societies over time. In the Western world these forms conferred direction and meaning to any individual and social action. These visions are: the *center*, as the place of normative power; the *circle*, as the ideal type of any imagined community; the *border*, distinguishing insiders from outsiders; the *zone*, which maintains social limits to urban growth; the *void*, as the empty space vulnerable to military or ecological invasion; and the *network*, as a biological concept applied to city development. These visions maintained their influence through modern urban changes, forming spatial worlds and providing a spatial foundation to social interactions and territorial clustering.

Each of these visions has its counterpart in modernity, and current applications in globalized urban world. My aim here is to briefly show the relations between these “old” and “new” city visions.

“Center” originally meant something showing direction, and hence making the world livable for its inhabitants. Early forms of centrality grew out of many

urban developments and gave rise to distinctive historic paths. City-centered economies were those of Venice, Antwerp, Genoa, and Amsterdam in the sequence of world-cities defined by Braudel. But this list is not exclusive. Between the 14th and 16th centuries Milan was the site of intense construction and renewal activities that prefaced the industrial revolution (Cipolla) and a transport revolution took place in Italian ports (Sombart). Shifts of investments from Italian cities to new business centers explain the growth of Lyon. When the center of the world economy moved to the Atlantic coast, from Lisbon to Amsterdam and Hamburg, South European urban experiments continued to take place. In the 19th and 20th centuries, industrial cities such as Barcelona, Lyon, and Turin engaged in creating new centralities at metropolitan and city-region levels.

“Circle” was the ideal-typical form of utopia until 19th century early urban planning, due to Saint-Simon’s followers of the Ecole Polytechnique. Circular was the form of ancient and medieval cities. But circular is also the form of cities when walls are replaced by metropolitan expansion, as is the case of Milan. Circularity means also circulation, openness, and mobility: for example, in Barcelona when the city was re-opened to the sea, a development that originated with the *Muralla de mar* in the 16th century and concluded with the 1992 Olympic Games. A circuit of economic factors and mobility are another meaning of the word: e.g., the ability to cut the merchant circuit (Schumpeter) is the attribute of Mediterranean cities such as Genoa. Here, “circle” means the social frame of interaction of cities when viewed by their collective-oriented entrepreneurs.

“Border” originally meant wall, limit (the ancient *limes* of the Roman Empire), or region (city limits are defined by a *rex*); in modern times it identifies the urban periphery, the *banlieue*. All are versions of the idea of a social border delimiting the social world and defining “insiders” with respect to what is outside.

The failures of classic urban policies of social integration have given rise to new trends in which a border is conceived as a place of transformation, a borderland for encounters. Mediterranean cities such as Barcelona, Marseilles, Genoa, or Naples, with their ports, are in this sense ideal types of the city of flows. They can accommodate the contemporary growth of the “mobile city.”

“Zone” was originally the commercial part of the city where artisans were located. It was a place of iden-

tity based on creative activity. In modern times, zoning identifies urban planning tools. Again, Barcelona thanks to Cerdà in the 19th century comes to mind. Only later was zoning of another kind introduced Europe and the US. Eventually zoning came to indicate a zone of transition, marking the passage from someplace to no-place (from *lieux* to *non-lieux*). Zoning has always demarcated spaces; but its effects have always extended beyond city limits, to new conurbations.

The city as bazaar, as sequence, as cluster, as laboratory, as a place of knowledge: all these various forms can be analyzed as early experiments in Mediterranean cities.

The “void,” the *terrain vague*, the dismissed area, the gray area, the derelict area, the *friche*, close to the center or near the city limits: all are signs of how capitalist societies organize social space through selective processes. There is always something and somebody that is devaluated in the name of value creation. Both show how society in metropolitan life creates and reproduces hidden spaces.

But the void is also the paradigm of “free” space for occupation by human civilizations. In Mediterranean cities, the void is the area where inhabitants interact and produce socialized worlds: informal activities, informal markets, casual work, the temporary occupation of space. It is the street, the collective. As Walter Benjamin wrote about Naples: “The existence, which to North Europeans means the most private activity, is here a collective matter”.

And finally, to the definition of “network.” From the classic metaphor of city government, to network as a biological model for city growth, to networking as an expression of contemporary capitalist spirit: network has always been a paradigmatic form of city in its unlimited connective power. But dependence on a net-

work rather than on a territorial hinterland is a distinctive creation of a few exceptional cities in the past (Gottmann), and particularly Mediterranean cities such as Venice, Genoa, and Barcelona. They are the prototype of the contemporary world city network (Taylor).

From organic networks such as those in geometric and rational urban planning we are now passing to a concept of network as a connection without any foundation. This epistemological turn is the basis for understanding the main empirical developments of the contemporary urban world. Again, historically, Mediterranean cities have been an “open-source” and “soft” network of people, as opposed to the more rationalized Weberian orientation towards an organized capitalist city.

References

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