

Mind the gap! Global cities and ordinary cities in the planning perspective

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical debate about the selectivity through which the existing literature identifies the critical factors in both urban development and competitiveness. It highlights the need to establish policies aimed at “ordinary cities” (Amine Graham, 1997) and “ordinary geographies” (Jonas e Ward, 2007). By analyzing the case of Rome, Italy, this paper explores the consequences of such literature for planning choices, especially for those cities that are not supported by a mature system of governance.

It is well established that cities and urban regions are considered the most significant organizations and social units in the post-industrial era. The academic focus on urban regions was a result of the convergence between studies on competitiveness and disciplines like Regional Economy and Economic Geography, which tended to focus on the relationship between post-industrial capitalism and the process of regionalization. Since the first studies on industrial de-verticalization and emerging patterns of production localization, the literature has increasingly related the economic success of firms to specific characters of territories, including face-to-face contacts, knowledge spill over and relationships based on trust.

All cities are therefore framed to look like the leaders of the global urban hierarchy: Global City Regions and Mega City Regions, large territories combining hard and soft infrastructures, socializing spaces, multi-culturality, talent, tolerance; cities offering a network structure made up of Marshall nodes of production.

The rigidity of the current conceptions of urban competitiveness, supported also by international organizations (OCDE, 2006; Territorial Agenda, 2007), often leads to negative consequences for urban planning policies in cities that are not yet supported by a developed system of governance. This is the case for Rome, where planning policy has followed guidelines proposed by existing literature. The article argues that the oversimplification of urban development and competitiveness can result in planning policies divorced from the real issues, thus causing a unique set of social and environmental consequences.

1. Introduction

Which is the contribution of the experience of Rome to the national and international development? Which is the competitiveness level of the city on the global arena? Which are the strengths and weaknesses of its productive system from a planning perspective? These questions offer the inputs to investigate on planning patterns for ordinary cities (Amin and Graham, 1997) in a phase of the economy during which, now more than ever and at all the geographical scales, cities are considered as engines for the economy.

Rome is a southern European capital, showing a good demographic dynamic and a pretty good level of richness and occupation. However, it is not able to control and orient the global economy and society. This is also what results from the different rankings offered by the international literature, where Rome is always positioned at a lower level than the top of the global urban hierarchy. This is probably due to the fact that Rome presented a particular development path, sometimes forced to apply specific policies, which made it a tertiary city, tourist not by natural evolution, never industrial and still agricultural if we look outside of the compact city.

During the last two decades the local institutions chose a new development pattern, with the aim of increasing the level of international attractiveness and visibility, focusing mainly on tourism and culture. At the same time, the planning choices tried to modify the settlement and the functional

structure of the city, trying to adjust the traditional gap between centre and periphery. This has represented a big effort, inspired to the models of development and competitiveness experimented by global cities, which unfortunately resulted ineffective.

Keeping in mind the scientific debate to draw critical inputs and useful proposals for the development of the city, this paper offers an investigation of the context of Rome, its productive and territorial structure and the recent planning choices.

The objective is not to understand how Rome could become a global city, as this would not be an objective in line with its characters and potentials. Rather, the intention is to benefit from the international literature and the patterns proposed for global cities to understand and criticize the choices made for Rome as an “ordinary city”. The negative effects produced by the planning policies, indeed, are partially due to the oversimplification through which sometimes the complex relationship among city/economy/development is presented.

At the same time, the geographical category of the global city seems useful, anyway, to formulate some indications for the development of Rome in the next years.

1. Global cities. Inputs from the literature

The global city is a well known metaphor through which the relationship between a urban centre and its economic development is being interpreted. The globalization process and the ICT development changed this relationship; the concepts of concentration, hierarchy, spatial agglomeration and inner scale economies used to describe the city, but at present the context is quite different.

Even during the industrial era the international character of some cities was highlighted, mainly from the political, cultural, economic and media point of view. However, these cities remained linked to their countries of origin, as they represented a fundamental channel of internationalization (Hall, 1966). During the 80s it became evident the need to change the interpretative framework in order to understand the tremendous change that was going on.

What was happening was the progressive creation of a global system of production and trade exchange among a global network of cities (or, rather, large urban regions). The capability to dominate these urban systems depended on the fact that in these areas it was concentrated the majority of the international economic and productive capital, by that time already free from distance constraints (Friedmann e Wolff, 1982). They also worked as nodes of coordination and government of an economic, entrepreneurial, social and cultural system scattered and fragmented across the space of global flows (Sassen, 1991; Castells, 1996).

As a consequence of the convergence between the studies upon the network of “territorialized” production and the globalization process, the global cities, nodes of control and orientation of the economy and society, assume in the XXI century the physiognomy of the so called global-city regions or mega-city regions.

This geographical category helps in the definition of a urban formation of wide dimension, made up of a network of Marshall local economies, able to attract and keep sectors and functions of key relevance for the global economy: i) financial and production services; ii) command and control functions; iii) cultural and creative industry; iv) tourism (Scott, 2001; Hall e Pain, 2006).

Cities at the top of the global urban hierarchy are thus described in a very different way from the Fordist city: on the one hand, the functions have changed and own a different range of operations, as it happens for example in tourism and culture (Celant, 2007); and, on the other hand, they also show a different shape, generally polycentric, more suitable for the competitiveness, the growth of firms and the economic development in general.

Hall e Pain (2006), in the opening of a paper titled ‘from metropolis to polyopolis’, describe as follows the characters of the polycentric urban mega-region (global): “a series of anything between ten and fifteen cities and towns, physically separate but functionally networked, clustered around

one or more larger central cities, and drawing enormous economic strength from a new functional division of labour [...] It is no exaggeration to say that this is the emerging urban form at the start of the 21st century”.

Polycentrism, thus, becomes one of the most relevant elements of urban policies during this century, both for encouraging the competitiveness of cities (OECD, 2006) and for promoting a competitive and sustainable development (as it mentioned in the document ESDP of 1999 and in the Territorial Agenda of 2007). This process refers to three different characters: i) the regional structural morphology, an outcome of the scaling up of economic activities and population on the pre-existing settlement; ii) a thick inner network of functional relations based on specialization and exchange; iii) the autonomy of the nodes together with the will to cooperate to catch the opportunities offered by the globalization, respecting its own identity and territorial vocation.

2.1 Rome and the global cities

Although the urban systems of the XXI century are characterized by the depth of internal relations, their position in the urban hierarchy is generally measured by the international relations.

Among the studies that classify the cities and define the hierarchy, both through the measure of the assets (Hall, 1966; Friedmann e Wolf, 1982; Sassen, 1991; Scott, 2001) and through the estimation of the flows and the relationships of the nodes (Castells, 1996; Hall e Pain, 2006; Taylor, 2004), Rome always results at a level lower than the top.

The same happens in those studies that estimate the level of competitiveness of territories and cities (general and per sector) using performance indicators (usually economic performance) or indicators of potential; as well as in those researches studying the causes and the key factors of the international positioning.

It is possible to make some examples of these researches, with the ultimate aim of verifying how Rome could be hardly represented in urban ranking systems, mainly conceived having in mind US and North-American cities.

As an example, in the studies conducted by Loughborough Globalization and World Cities Group (GaWC, Taylor et al, 2002; Taylor, 2004), Rome is considered among the Gamma World Cities, a sort of sub-global cities characterized by a good demographic dimension and a functional endowment able to influence the regional and national scale, thanks to the presence of global services (banking, fashion, culture, media). Actually, Rome is still far from the most dynamic and globalized cities. This is what emerges also from the report on urban competitiveness, published by OECD in 2006, where Rome is positioned at an intermediate position.

Rome is at the 41st position in terms of economic competitiveness; at the 20th position in terms of annual growth of economic competitiveness between 1996 and 2002; at the 27th position for work productivity; at the 5th position for the differential in terms of richness with respect to the country they belong to (the position turns 20th when the comparison is made considering the work productivity).

Rome is thus a city with a good demographic dimension and an economic performance similar to other OECD cities, although with firms and economic actors not able to connect it to the global networks.

The modest level of internationalization emerges also from the recent classification elaborated by the European Commission (2007). Rome is included in the category of International Hub, namely cities that have a European and global influence. However in this class the city is classified as one of the Established Capitals: it has a high position in the global urban hierarchy, a diversified economic structure and a highly concentrated richness.

Rome is also a different city from Milan, which is classified as a Knowledge Hub: a key node of the global economy and a guide city at a national scale, characterized by the presence of international firms, high level of talent and creativity, high connectivity with the rest of the world.

In short, Rome owns the political and cultural centrality typical of great capitals; but not the economic centrality, neither at a national nor at a global scale.

A similar result is obtained in the ESPON report dedicated to the theme of polycentrism in EU (ESPO, 2001).

Once defined the functional urban areas (FUAs), ESPON elaborated a rank on the basis of mass characters, competitiveness, connectivity, knowledge level. Rome is classified as Metropolitan European Growth Area (at a lower level than global nodes, London and Paris), belonging to the group of large cities with a good score in all indicators but with a role bordered in the sub-global framework.

2. We do not only live of global...

The economy of Rome is based upon assets different from those of global cities. This is evident if we look at the external openness. According to the data of the Istituto Tagliacarne, in 2007, at a provincial scale, the market openness and the export propensity showed quite clearly the weak projection of Rome at the global scale: the first indicator (24) is almost four times lower than Milan (88), lower than the Latium Region (27,42) and than the whole central area of Italy (38,25); the same happens to the second indicator, that shows for Rome low values (about 5%) against Milan (over 30%), Latium (almost 10%) and the whole country (over 25%).

This performance comes evidently from an economic structure not very inclined to the external trade as well as a centrality which is not based upon the productive system, but rather on other sectors. One of these sectors is tourism, a field with regard to which Rome plays a very important role at an international level.

In 2008, the total arrivals have been almost 10 millions, two third of which represented by foreigners, over than one fourth of whom coming from US.

At the same time it is important to highlight how Rome is able to attract only about 8% of international tourism flows; a share similar to the other European Capitals but much lower than the two main international gateways, London (35%) and Paris (19%).

Therefore, what is the economy of Rome based on? The city is affected by its historical role of Capital of the State, with the main occupational sectors still represented by public services, commerce, tourism, housing. At the same time there are signs of evolution of the third sector towards more innovative and dynamic sectors, as an effect of the impact of the international trends on the traditional third sector structure¹ (Ciccarelli et. al, 2011).

In general, if we consider the relevance of the third sector (87,6% of the added value in 2007 NUTs3), Rome shows a situation similar to the most advanced economies.

The service sector has been increasing during the last years, particularly in some innovative segments as informatics and research. Some other services as entertainment, culture and sport have also been acquiring relevance, showing somehow an evidence that the city is evolving towards a post-modern economy. On the other side, we can also identify an important growth of occupation in traditional sectors as health, public administration, and constructions.

To sum up, it is a system showing some innovative trends but in an economic base that can be still considered rather traditional.

¹ It is not a coincidence that in the ranking proposed by Richard Florida and the group of the *Creative Cities* Rome is positioned at the top of the hierarchy of the creativity index in Italy, and that this position is due to the voice Talent (beside that of Tolerance). Talent, indeed, is measured on the base of the population with a high level of education and on the base of the number of public and private researchers (Tinagli and Florida, 2005, tav. 19). However, the city is only 4th when it comes to the level of technology reached.

3. The relationship between centre and periphery. A likely unsolved issue

The analysis of the productive profile and the internal space structure of Rome helps to explain why the city cannot be considered as an urban centre relevant at a global level, as it is confirmed by both the most elementary indicators and the more complex results of international rankings.

The international literature pays attention also to the form of the city, the settlement urban structure, and claims that the polycentric urban form, the so called 'multi-clustered agglomeration', is more competitive than the mono-centric model.

This level of competitiveness is the output of the economic and relational strength of the different nodes of a polycentric urban region (Hall, 1997; Lambooy, 1998; Scott, 2001).

It is therefore interesting to investigate the gap between centre and periphery and the planning choices adopted in Rome, which seem to have increased this gap.

Rome has been often proposed as a model for demographic concentration and economic and functional polarization. Across the territory of the municipality, which is of extraordinary extent², is concentrated over 66% of the population resident in the whole province (the average value in Italy is 30%), and about half of the whole regional population (20% in Italy).

During the recent years a change in the relationship centre/periphery can be highlighted, with a demographic evolution more evident in the province than in the central municipality (Salvati and Sabbi, 2010).

The central municipality is made up of nineteen "Municipi" (sub-municipal administrative districts) with a demographic dimension similar to many middle sized Italian cities (between 100.000 and 200.000 inhabitants). These administrative districts own very limited decentralized functions, mainly limited to the field of education, social services, culture, local entertainment, commerce, handicraft, urban maintenance and local police.

The territorial complexity described above has not found a suitable governance system yet, neither forms of cooperation that could be considered as an expression of polycentrism.

It is worth to mention two weaknesses in particular, which describe how the institutions of the municipality considered the central city (the compact and historical city) the only resource of interest for the entire province. It is just on this area that are concentrated the investments for development, with a general reluctance towards initiatives of cooperation with the rest of the territory.

The first weakness is represented by the difficulties that Rome has in identifying its own metropolitan area. According to the law 142 of 1990, the Regions were supposed to identify their own metropolitan areas; but Rome, since then, has never reached a common vision. Only in 2010 Rome has been acknowledged "Capital City of the State" with special power (Law n. 42/2009), though limited to the municipal scale (NUTs5 or LAU-1).

The attitude of reducing the metropolitan area to the municipality of Rome is in conflict with the suggestions of the literature and the orientations of the European policy. What they suggest is, indeed, a cooperation on the widest possible urban area, in order to maximize the assets of specialization.

This spatial delimitation, thus, represents another missed opportunity for identifying a territorial system, large and institutionally cohesive enough so as to propose an innovative planning vision for Rome.

The second weakness is represented by the fact that, during the last twenty years, the planning choices adopted by the administrators of the city oriented the investments mainly towards the city centre, disregarding the potential for development existing at the other geographical scales.

² The municipality of Rome is over 1.307 Kms; Milan, 182 Kms; Naples, 117; Turin, 130. The surface of the municipality (NUTs5) is about 25% of the province (NUTs3) and over 7% of the Latium Region (NUTs2).

The New Master Plan (1993-2008) and subsequently the New Strategic Plan (2008) identified in tourism and culture the two main sectors with effective impacts on the development of the city. According to this approach, only the central areas are promoted, while the periphery benefited only from initiatives functional to the development of the centre (Gemmiti, 2008a/b).

The most enhanced sectors are tourism, culture and large-scale retail trade, with structures (large hotels, congress centers, shopping malls) designed by famous architects. The objective is to give to the city a new image, to create a homogeneous and converging landscape, which is one of the essential infrastructure for global cities (Sassen, 2008).

The policy has been oriented towards interventions unable to modify from the roots the relationship city-economy and to encourage local specializations able to generate relations and exchanges among different spaces of the city system. Rather, it has been preferred to privilege fake approaches, thanks to which many cities aim at upgrading and marketing dismissed areas, waterfront and historical centers, creating a new image but not a real renovation of its productive and urban identity.

This process of construction of a new landscape and new functional identity has been implemented, in Rome as in many other cities, with a net distinction between the centre (compact and consolidated) and the periphery.

4. Conclusions

As a result of the last twenty years of planning policies, Rome has gained, at least on the surface, an image of international city, culturally active and post-modern in her architectural symbolism. However, its role hardly exceeds the national borders, except for the appeal the city exercises towards worldwide tourists.

The reason for this limited internationalization, as mentioned, resides in the economic and productive structure based on traditional sectors, a urban and province area never really industrial, strongly tertiary-oriented and, at times, still agricultural.

The limited international role stands on the lack of a solid tertiary and quaternary productive structure of the few national and foreign firms settled in its territory. Besides that, there are weaknesses in the governance system, which was not able to orient the planning policies towards new patterns and more suitable for Rome than those adopted by global cities.

As is asserted in literature by geographers and economists (Krugman, 1997; Amin e Thrift, 2000), if competitiveness does not necessarily represent an imperative, a development based upon cohesion and sustainability does. This aim cannot be gained if there is a lack of support for the local economy in all the shapes and spaces where it materializes itself.

The main issue, emerging from this short comparison between the characters of Rome and those of the cities at the top of the global urban hierarchy, stands in the weakness of the solutions proposed at the institutional and planning level.

The decision to identify a metropolitan area as overlapping with the municipal borders shows how the occasion to implement innovative solutions for the political and administrative structure was missed.

Rethinking the Role of Rome as capital is needed. This is certainly a tricky issue and will create difficulties for reshaping a network of urban systems autonomous and free from the Capital, but would recognize and enhance the potentials for development, leaving behind the consolidated vision of the dualism between centre and periphery, i.e. a really systemic vision (Celant, 1994).

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