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PROBLEMS AND CONTRADICTIONS IN THE CONSTITUTION OF A SOUTHERN EUROPEAN METROPOLITAN AREA:
CATANIA

Abstract: The Metropolitan Area of Catania has been created with a Regional law of 1986 (together with that of Palermo and Messina). With its 27 municipalities and for its characteristics it resembles, more than any other area in Sicily, a Metropolitan Area (MA), that is, a complex urban system in continuous evolution and at very advanced stage of the urban life cycle. However, it is still possible to trace some incongruous elements in the creation of such a system: a) the decentralisation process of function and activities, with respect to the main urban core, is at a very early stage; b) the main urban core still has difficulties to attract highly technological tertiary activities and strategic services which would allow a connection between the local, the national and the global level; c) the medium and small size centres have a low functional specialisation and are identified by highly hierarchical relationships; d) the MA has a weak cohesion in terms of economic and functional relations.

The ambiguity of the relationships among the different centres, their low level of specialisation and the strong hierarchical dependency of the peripheral ones represent an obstacle to the creation of the *Metropolitan Government* of the area of Catania. This appears as a top down manoeuvre without solid territorial basis and with persistence of contradictory elements in the development and consolidation process of the MA.

This does not mean that a system to govern the MA would not be necessary to strengthen the evolution of Catania urban complex. This evolution has, in fact, known a clear intensification in the last ten years and has shown how urgent it is for this Government to realise socio-economic, infrastructural and cultural policies capable of accelerating the ongoing process. It is also essential for this Government to make its choices without incorporating automatically the power of local autonomies, but by reaching agreements on common instances.

1. FROM THE DEMOGRAPHIC CONCENTRATION TO THE PROCESSES OF URBAN DECENTRALIZATION.

The city of Catania represents the urban area of the highest hierarchical level of a vast territory situated in the south – east of Sicily, what once was defined the “ The Val di Noto”. Two important sub-regions converge towards this area, the Etna (one) in the North and the Iblea in the South, connected by a big natural amphitheatre represented by the “Piana di Catania”.

Between the 1950's and the beginning of the 1960's this province capital underwent a strong population growth, due to a high birth rate and to relevant immigration fluxes, from numerous small and medium size Etna communes, that spread out in radial arrangement from the volcano peak, and from the surrounding Province and eastern Sicily.

The strong growth of the resident population (299.629 inhabitants in 1951; 363.928 in 1961 and 400.048 inhabitants in 1971), the increase in mobility and the progressive saturation of building areas has determined in the following years a gradual reflux of inhabitants towards Etna communes and North coast areas and the movement of the urban area outside the commune limits. A disordered expansion first influenced the “first ring” centres, closer to the city (Acicastello, Camporotondo Etneo, Gravina di Catania, Mascalucia, Misterbianco, Motta S. Anastasia, S.Giovanni La Punta, S.Gregorio di Catania, S. Pietro Clarenza, S. Agata Li Battiati, Tremestieri, Valverde) that have in some cases more than doubled their population , then, from the early 1970's , the “second ring” centres (Nicolosi, Pedara, Trecastagni, Viagrande) with the result that the city limits extended to give life to a vast urban agglomeration (Cirelli,1979).

After 1971, considering the urban agglomeration , the demographic size of Catania gradually diminished both in relative and absolute terms (380.328 resident inhabitants in 1981 and 349.464 in 2000), but inside the city the demographic load was not redistributed regularly, as the ten districts in which the commune territory is now formed evidenced a different demographic behaviour. The municipalities of the historical centre have progressively diminished their population , while others have not registered appreciable demographic variations, except for Librino – S.Giorgio (IX circumscription), situated on the far southern city outskirts, where the population increased constantly during the 1990's, thanks to a relevant development of the popular building constructions.

This course has changed the urban demographic order, but has not produced a more efficient and balanced articulation of the activities and functions, which are fundamentally anchored to the historical centre and the far southern outskirts (X district)ⁱ abandoning the marginal municipalities, some of which, although registering a strong population increase, as for the IX district, remain without essential services and require radical interventions and rebalancing structures.

The population centrifuge process has modified the relationship between the province capital and the Etna communes that have developed in a spontaneous way, without the support of adequate urban instruments generating an extremely chaotic territory very difficult to manage. In fact the population decentralization towards communes that have a physical and functional tie with the Province capital has not been followed by a similar decentralization of functions , activities and non prime services.

Lacking an important decentralization of the province capital city functions and above all a parallel economic agricultural and artisan development of the minor Etna centres, the urban agglomeration still remains monocentric. However there are

exceptions, represented by some communes west of Catania (Misterbianco and Paternò), where since the 1970's, a spontaneous process of relocation occurred of the commercial and productive activities, abandoning the historical centre for bigger and cheaper spaces and areas, where other completely new activities have spreadⁱⁱ.

The urban centre in Paternò has acquired its own identity and attractions exerting them on the nearby communes and Etna areas (Motta S.Anastasia, Belpasso, Ragalna, S.Maria di Licodia, Biancavilla, Adrano, Bronte) (Cirelli,1988). Another centre to the north, around which, a minor urban subsystem has developed, is Acireale, towards which small nearby centres have moved to (Acicatena, Aci Bonaccorsi, Zafferana Etnea e S.Venerina, Zafferana Etnea eS.Venerina).

The weak development of the functions and economy of the Etna centres is still mainly tied to agricultural and artisan activities. Consequently, not only the higher level and strategic functions remain anchored to the province capital, but also many that are decentralized in the more advanced urban areas, thus permit the functional specialization of the minor and intermediate centres and moreover the formation of mature Metropolitan systems. The lack of an efficient decentralization process of the functions produces evident effects on Catania, where there are relevant congestion phenomena as in outskirts centres. Therefore these last outskirts areas, except for rare cases, are not able to unify activities and adequate services to satisfy the residents' local and most elementary needs, and are obliged to turn to the province capital increasing commuter movements and entry and exit traffic, with additional problems for the transport system.

2. THE INSTITUTION OF THE METROPOLITAN AREA (M.A.) AND ITS MAIN CONTRADICTIONS.

In 1986, a Regional Law established the Catanese Metropolitan Area (and that of Palermo and Messina) including 27 communesⁱⁱⁱ. The objective was to plan essential sectors for a M.A. development at a higher commune level (among which mobility, viability and transport; residential public building; intercommune works; commercial planning) attaining excellent management efficiency of some services common to all the territory (transport; drinkable water distribution and gas; collection and elimination of wastes).

The institution of the M.A. clearly represented the understanding that without the development rationalization of the Catanese urbanization and its management (as for the other major urban areas of the Island, that is Palermo and Messina), it would not succeed in giving way to complex interrelations typical of a mature M.A.

The Catanese urbanization, which includes numerous Etna communes, is undoubtedly the closest for characteristics to a M.A., however we cannot ignore that internally we have:

- a) the early stage of decentralization functions and activities, compared to the urban nucleus in Catania;
- b) the difficulty of this dominating urban nucleus to attract quaternary activities and strategic services that should allow an interface role between the local level and national and global levels,
- c) prevalent rigid hierarchic relationships and the very little functional specialization of medium and smaller size centres (these activities and the Acireale and Paternò services, responsible for gravitation sub-areas, do not show a functional level for the role they should develop);
- d) a weak cohesion of all the M.A. in terms of economic and functional interrelation.

The relation ambiguity among various centres, their weak specialization and strong hierarchical dependence evidence that the creation of the new Metropolitan Government for the area of Catania is:

- 1) a piloted operation without foundations sufficiently solid on a territorial basis;
- 2) with predictable consequences in terms of conflictuality and uncertainty of the consolidating process and development of the M.A.^{iv}.

A direct confirmation has come from the complaints already put forth by some communes, which refuse to be void of important functions, and have asked for a Constitutional Court sentence contrary to the present government forms of the M.A. This does not mean that the creation of a government common to M.A. is not necessary or that this does not contribute to the acceleration of typical innovative processes of advanced M.A. However this government, now attributed to the Regional Province, works so as to overcome the limits of the present regional law, that reduces the participation of the lower levels, above all the communes, realizing all the necessary political choices from infrastructures, economic, social and cultural bases on widely accepted applications, without taking away local autonomy. Furthermore, the government action, in particular in the planning field, should be directed to local resources, with these objectives:

- a) a major division of work on a territorial basis;
- b) activating among various M.A. communes synergic processes and economic, financial, technological and cultural circuits.

On the contrary it is probable that some of the 27 communes, feeling deprived of autonomy and competence, without an adequate compensation, present new obstacles to the development of the M.A.^v.

The necessity to converge on common objectives, on behalf of local organizations and local resources, is more and more important, as lately an acceleration of some spontaneous processes are evident. On one hand, these processes exalt the project abilities of the province capital and underline its important functions while, on the other hand, they tend to rebalance on various levels, activities and functions in the urban agglomeration area and its relation with other M.A. communes.

In fact, these spontaneous processes, to consolidate, require interventions aimed at accelerating the decentralization of part of the functions and lower rank activities that congest the central areas of Catania, impeding a better development of the more

qualified functions (directional, financial, commercial, services, research, competence, formation, culture, tourism, etc.). At the same time they cannot do without the support of projects to reinforce the strategic city functions and better the internal and external access to its activity and service, so as to evaluate the urban economic potential.

We can say, it supports together with adequate choices, a centralization and decentralization process of a selective type, typical of the most advanced metropolitan areas to give the province capital, in a perspective of functional development, the direction and control of the M.A., later to include a wider territory comprising a large part of central and south-east Sicily. A process able to reinforce the “urban personality” of Catania, increase the efficiency, develop its social- economic, commercial and administrative interrelations with the territory. At the same time facilitate the physical and functional requalification of the urban spaces and improve the ecologic equilibrium and environment conditions.

The enrichment of the peripheric commune resources and potential should contribute to accelerate the functional specialization processes. The formation of these specialized centres should be associated to a major cohesion inside the M.A. in Catania and to a higher connectivity, resulting from a reinforcement of the urbanistic, functional, economic, social and cultural interrelations and interdependence.

In other words the formation process of the Catania M.A., as in other more advanced urban systems, should give life to a dynamic context, dominated by strong innovative ideas, giving way to complex forces that only apparently seem contrasting, but in reality converge towards common objectives:

- a) those that form in the dominating city of Catania selective centralization processes of the quaternary activities and strategic services (commands, direction, orientation, technological innovation, financial and cultural services);
- b) those that, thanks to the diffusion of the technological informatics, stimulate the decentralization of functions, services and intermediate and inferior level activities (industrial, commercial, cultural, tourist, etc.).

The first should strengthen the ability of the city of Catania, a dominating centre, to give activities and strategic services to the M.A. and to the regional territory, permitting the introduction in extraregional and global circuits. The latter should refer to the infrastructure, development and functional specialization of intermediate and inferior level centres and contribute to attenuate the hierarchic type dependence among the larger and smaller centres, to the advantage of functional interdependence of the horizontal type among the cities of the urban metropolitan system.

The activating of M.A. as that of Catania thus means to give voice, with specific projects to the forces that contribute to the urban development process:

- a) modelling the network structure of the M.A., articulated in differentiated connections with dominant functions, specialized and hierarchically dependent;
- b) accentuating the complementary ties among urban network connections and the division of work on territorial basis;
- c) activating synergic processes and economic, financial, technological and cultural circuits capable of creating higher levels of territorial aggregation.

In this context, to the network structure would correspond a model of flexible valorization processes of the local resources, to adapt to physical, cultural and historical differences of the various cities of the M.A. and to develop an interconnection by linking the different local, regional, national and international circuits^{vi}.

The care of these processes is entrusted to the project and decision abilities of the M.A., with particular regard to those of the dominating urban nucleus, with the aim of reinforcing its strategic functions. Functions that in the M.A. perspective should spread to the south-east of Sicily, entering a policentric urban system having as fundamental areas the city of Catania, Siracusa and Ragusa. In this case Catania has to carry out important functions among local, sub-regional and regional networks (transport, communication, services, cultural aspects, technological innovation and organization, etc.) and national and Euro-Mediterranean networks.

3. PROJECT ABILITIES, CONSOLIDATING PERSPECTIVES AND RELAUNCHING OF THE METROPOLITAN SYSTEM.

At the moment the Communal Administration and other local, public and private organizations are elaborating or realizing different projects that should contribute to reinforce the Metropolitan Area and in particular the functions of Catania which is a vital centre of this area and of the urban System in south-east Sicily. Some of these, above all the most recent, specifically refer to the regional programme (P.O.R. Sicilia 2000-2006, Asse Città, N.5), thanks to this programme a relevant sum of European Union Funds is absorbed.

Among the principal projects and programmes the most important are:

- 1) Urban Project, which carries out integrated, economic, social and environmental interventions for three districts in the Historical Centre (Cappuccini – Antico Corso, Civita- Angeli Custodi e S. Cristoforo), in the I Municipality, with about 53,000 inhabitants, nearly 16% of the communal population (Cassar, 2000 p.81)^{vii}.
- 2) The Territorial Agreement “ Catania Sud”, that covers a relevant part of the X area (San Giuseppe La Rena), the most southern coast foresees an investment of 100 billion for tourist requalification, development of hotel accommodation and free time structures and services.

- 3) The strategic structures in the new town planning scheme are almost complete. These structures, organized in “systems”, aim at the adjustment and relaunching of the urban infrastructures, improving life quality and life style, this is possible for the presence of new urban parks, a requalification of the city image and , at last, an acceleration of the processes decentralizing intermediate and inferior level functions towards minor centres of the M.A. and centralizing higher level services in the province capital^{viii}.
- 4) The start of the PIT (Intergrated Territorial Project) “Catania metropolitan city” forsees the formation of a metropolitan city with Catania and other eight Etna municipalities (Aci Bonaccorsi, Mascalucia, Misterbianco, S.Agata li Battiati, Gravina, Tremestieri, San Pietro Clarenza e San Giovanni La Punta).
- 5) The diffusion of requalification interventions and re-use of disposed containers, are an occasion to requalify the city and the urban structure, these interventions were started by the University, Commune and Province.
- 6) There is an ever increasing offer of culture opportunities, spaces for recreation activities and tourism, the multiplication of structures to support and relaunch commercial and fair activities. These structures and activities are part of the advanced projects of the Commune of Catania and should have a major role in the urban regeneration, relaunching the city image both inside and outside the M.A. and in the general consent and social cohesion of this area.
- 7) The numerous works, many already financed or being realized, connected to the urban and extra-urban mobility, among which the completion of the light metropolitan railway and the Circumetnea adjustment have an important role; the expansion and the restructuralization of the airport, the completion of the Catania-Siracusa motor-way, the doubling of the Messina-Catania-Siracusa railway track, the relaunching of the port area structures and redistribution of goods by different means of transport, realizing the Bicocca interport, serving eastern Sicily.
- 8) The territory valorization of the Metropolitan Area, the Etna Park, the Simeto protected Oasis and the new Urban Archeologic Park.
- 9) Structure development to encourage the opening of new undertakings and attract external investments, among which very important is the undertaking incubator, BIC Sicily in the Pantano d’Arce industrial area and the office “Investi a Catania”^{ix}. In the future a relevant contribution should come from the Parco Tecnologico Siciliano, that has had enormous launching difficulties.
- 10) The formation of a high technology pole (computer systems, telecommunication and biotechnologies) that represent an unrepeatable occasion to improve the future of part of a lagging region as Sicily. In fact the New Economy, where the fundamental resources are information and

knowledge and the instruments to create it, with its technology discontinuity offers new suburban development opportunities (Cacace,1999). Around the foot of Mount Etna a “ high tech” area is developing, defined by the international press “ Etna Valley” (Betts, 2000), resulting from the collaboration between some high technological industries (first ST Microelectronics and Nokia) and the University^x. We must however consider, that the formation of a proper high technological district will require the removal of some bonds present in the Etna Region^{xi}.

The success of these projects should contribute to extend and strengthen the functional urban relations of the local territory considered a metropolitan and sub-regional network system. Some of them can also improve the competitiveness of the higher level urban system, giving Catania the possibility and opportunities of comparison with other Euro-Mediterranean economic networks, culture, communication, tourism, etc. and the possibility of an intermediary local global role assigned to higher level urban units of the metropolitan areas.

It is evident in any case that the realization of these projects is entrusted to an executive class which during these last years seems to be more far-sighted and courageous, as to a more careful, efficient Public Administration^{xii}. These projects must be backed by urban and territorial marketing policy able to plan selective images on a national and international level, to attract new undertakings and activities, national and international investments, tourist movements, innovation and research centres, etc. This is the only way to respond to the hypercompetitive dynamics brought by the development of a postmodern and communication society (founded on the ability to organize the access, use and knowledge development), that involves not only undertakings, but the territories and their urban areas, facing problems of localism and globalization^{xiii}.

In this context the decisions concerning the historical centre, with its free-time and cultural areas take a particular meaning. As the historical centre represents, for its historical importance and urban qualities, the identity of the whole metropolis, having a central role in the strategies of promoting the city and urban marketing, for the economy and local community development.

The decisions relative to the historical centre are inseparable from those relative to the city culture, recreative areas, tourism and structures to relaunch fair and commercial activities. Projects that have as common denominator an urban development policy, in line with what is being realized in the most advanced European cities where the economy is ever more founded on commercial, financial and management activities on one side and on the other, technology, innovation, art and culture production and recreative activities and tourism. These activities have an ever more relevant role in the urban regeneration, the relaunching of the city image at an international and national level for the local citizens, increasing their consent and social cohesion^{xiv}.

ⁱ San Giuseppe La Rena the principal industrial area of Pantano d'Arci where there are some metropolitan infrastructures as the airport, railway station, fish, fruit and vegetable market, and some of the major projects to be realized to launch the city as the new aerostation, tourist and sea structures of the Territory Agreement for the South of Catania, the realization of new research and technology in the Etna Valley (Cassar, 2000).

ⁱⁱThe decentralization processes are also connected to the irresistible increase of distribution that has determined the rise of enormous commercial centres near motor-way exits, in peripheric municipalities (North of the airport and between Catania and Acicastello) as Misterbianco and in some Etna communes above all San Giovanni La Punta.

ⁱⁱⁱ These communes can be historically grouped in three categories: a) the Catanese mansions, governed until the XVII century by the Senate authorities of Catania (Camporotondo Etneo, Gravina di Catania, Mascalucia, Misterbianco, Pedara, S. Pietro Clarenza, S. Agata li Battiati, San Gregorio, Tremestieri, Trecastagni e Zafferana); b) the land which had belonged to the Administrative Authority of Acireale (Aci Bonaccorsi, Acicastello, Aci Catena, Aci S. Antonio, Valverde, Viagrande, e S. Venerina); c) the centres on the southern slopes of Mount Etna included or bordering with the old Moncada Family County and subject to the diocese of Catania (Belpasso, Motta S. Anastasia, Paternò, Ragalna, Nicolosi and S. Maria di Licodia).

^{iv} The sentence, emitted in 1997, rejected the commune requests, but the consequent procedures contributed to slow down the process for the activation of the M.A. government structures (Regional Province, 1998, pp. 21-34).

^vThe convocation of a programmed Conference to organize activation strategies of the M.A., where the principal interlocutors of the Province confront themselves:

- M.A. communes
- Service organizers
- Trade Unions
- Businessmen
- Consumer representatives.

This conference will be determining to understand the equilibrium on which the Catanese M.A. must stand to evaluate the development possibilities.

^{vi} The network type perspective, possible for the info-teleomatic technologies, consents the metropolitan system to compete on the global level maintaining its specific characteristics, but as it is based on a thick network of relations and interactions between centres and subjects it requires the definition of common objectives and instruments to reach them. (Martone, 1998). The development of integration strategies of the metropolitan economy in the global system supposes the presence inside an area of one or more global networks (direction, commerce, finance, research, innovation, culture etc.) by means of which the competitiveness of the metropolitan system and its network integrates with the global system Network that permits privilege and selective relations with the global systems.

^{vii} The Urban PIC , according to programme 11, establishes for Catania 50 billion to clear up the strongly degraded areas of the I municipality and to promote their economic activities (artisan and commercial activities) and employment, infrastructure, social service improvements and environment interventions.

^{viii} The first system of structures aims at the requalification of the most degraded areas of the urban network, their formal and functional requalification; another system at the reconfiguration of the city - sea relation and a third at a better integration of the areas south of Catania in the city, where there is the airport, port and Plaja coastal area.

^{ix} In Catania the BIC Sicilia (Business Innovation Centre) has operated since 1996 as incubator of new undertakings and support development, and it belongs to a European network for innovation centres. The attraction of new investments is entrusted to "Investi a Catania", which started its activity to accelerate the relative formalities for production investments and it has gradually widened its functions, as it is responsible for the management of the projects of the "Patto Territoriale Catania Sud", and for the promotion of the city image.

^x The components that characterize this technological district, now at an initial point, are:

- a) the presence of a pioneer undertaking, as production centre and "Know how high tech" (ST Microelectronics is one of the leading establishments in the microelectronic field with over 2,500 employees, 78% possess a degree, above all in engineering, and with the new establishment, one of the most innovative on a world level, will employ in 2003 other 1,500 employees);

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- b) ties between high tech University of Catania and Commune Administration, have contributed in creating material and non-material infrastructures, research and formation centres;
 - c) the availability of low cost human capital, above all engineers, educated in a prestigious university;
 - d) national and regional funds, (the new employees are exempted from social welfare contributions for six years);
 - e) the effects of attraction and concentration (spin in) compared to a growing number of international and local undertakings, exercised by ST Microelectronics (22 international companies are directly or indirectly tied to the MT production, some located inside the client's establishment, some independent establishments, as Nokia, which has created a research and development centre in telecommunications in Catania;
 - f) Antech-satellite communications; Aid; Chi Mei; Cities on line; IBM ; Media On Line; Telespazio; Olin; Openline; Sat; Wirenet, etc...) (Schillaci e Altri, 2000).

The development of local high-tech undertakings that do not operate in the microelectric field, benefit from the trust generated by the general diffused know how.

^{xi} Among the principal ties mentioned: the local undertakings are still too few and above all of small dimension and with few employees; the information flux prevalently follows hierarchical channels, from the big to the small undertakings and very rarely in the opposite direction, lacking the typical transverse ones of the evolved network; the level of the advanced services is still very modest; the enterprises and the networks able to expand the process towards the external (spin off) direction are rare; the catalyzer poles around which the development must expand are still too few; poor presence of risk capitals; absence of spin off academic; relation networks still prevalently subjective and poor presence of institutional ones.

^{xii} The change of the nature of the development processes induced by the New Economy and by the growing network connective functions has influenced the technical scientific knowledge and the management flux ability of information, redimensioning the hierarchies between the centre and suburbs and having new agglomeration factors emerging. Among these the availability of quality labour is as important as a managing class careful of the local needs and an efficient public Administration.

^{xiii} The growing competition between territories and urban and region systems, due to external causes (globalization, economy tertiary system, economic and monetary integration, interconnection of network and service mobility, technology, capital, people, undertakings seeking more convenient areas) and internal causes (decentralization of functions to regions and local organizations and new approach in the management of the public sector by applying management techniques) oblige the local and regional government to face the problem, to research competitive advantages at a local level, to utilize the territory resources, on the other hand to compete successfully at a global level, to attract productive holdings, service companies, businessmen, tourists, etc...

^{xiv} Two fundamental marketing strategies concern the metropolitan areas , external and internal, activating satisfaction – trust –attraction – value. The external strategies, regard the external subjects, aiming to attract and to generate trust in external clients, the internal strategies produce satisfaction in internal subjects to earn consent and increase the social cohesion (Valdani e Ancarani, 2000).

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