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1. Present Status of Planning

The role of planning in Italy is now in crisis, and this crisis has been going on for more than a decade. As a consequence, planning practitioners face a hard time when trying to deal with the national political framework and to relate to most important topics, such as commons, public spaces, environmental threats, and so on. In the widespread context of the neoliberal turn, Italy has been experiencing a growing attraction towards everything that is private, and a strong rejection of all that is public. However, planning proficiencies are still requested in those cases where civil society activates bottom-up processes for local transformation projects. These processes often try to fill the gap that is caused by the lack of efficiency in traditional, top-down policies. The ever-growing number of local organizations, NGOs, insurgent practices, and the like are proof of the attention paid to these bottom-up (and often agonistic) practices, which are, however, rarely supported by national and local governments – while sometimes the actual support of national and local governments is utterly rejected as a matter of principle. The reasons for this weak or non-existent support are linked to a rhetorical discourse that considers planning as a hindrance to the resolution of environmental and development issues and/or conflicts, rather than a proactive approach to the solution of the consequent problems. These general reflections can obviously be declined in different ways, based on local political peculiarities.

2. Dominant Themes and Media Coverage

Planning does not appear to be significant in Italian media discourses, but with one exception. When environmental calamities strike some parts of Italy, as in the case of the earthquake in L'Aquila or the floods in Genoa and Sicily, newspapers and television suddenly recall the issue of hydrogeological instability and blame planning for its inability to efficiently regulate land uses. This inability actually stems from a chronic lack of funding, as planners are perceived as rather annoying technicians who hinder the realization of strategic infrastructures through their questionable observations. The theme of infrastructures is instead particularly relevant to all media and to the national government, as shown in the case of the bridge connecting Sicily and Calabria, or the TAV (high-speed railway) connecting Turin and Grenoble.

3. Theory vs. Practice

The gap between theory and practice in planning is definitely growing in Italy. The reasons for this growth are linked to the weakening of planning and urban theories, which are increasingly beaten by generic neoliberal economic theories. Therefore,

we have a small niche of urban scholars and planners embracing progressive theories and critical positions, while at the same time, a large number of planning practitioners (most of them poorly equipped for theoretical insights on urban studies!) whose policies stem from the neoliberal dictate of tax cuts for the rich. As for the role of English literature, globalized academia places an exacting toll on Italian scholars and imposes the topics that must be discussed. Although these topics are indeed worth discussing, sometimes they do not pay enough attention to the Italian peculiarities, or are excessively tied to English themes.

4. Addressing and Reducing Disparities

Apparently, all planners in Italy talk about participation, social inclusion, social housing, and reducing the disparities between the rich and the poor. This is not a new approach, as since the 1960s some planners and urban scholars (Astengo, Olivetti, De Carlo, Doglio) showed their interest in social issues and proposed a planning approach that addressed the biggest spatial disparities. However, contemporary politicians have altered this discourse and keep repeating the same *totem words* (e.g. participation, inclusion, etc.) even in non-participatory and non-inclusive practices. For instance, a recent experiment of participatory planning in Palermo implied the organization of ETMs (electronic town meetings), but turned out to be just a rhetorical attempt to strengthen already existing policies, with no real attention to what people had to say. In our opinion, planners still believe that their actions could reduce spatial disparities, but the ongoing replacement of public/institutional planners with planning consultants (most of them being architects or engineers, and sometimes forced to respond to political recommendations) is causing a stalemate, with planning unable to efficiently address any sort of disparity.

5. Future Challenges and Education

The tradition of planning schools in Italy is quite recent, and stems from architectural and civil engineering studies. However, there are not many established schools of urban geography in Italy, or at least Italian geography is still more tied to history and, more recently, to cultural studies. As a consequence, and with few exceptions, architecture and engineering have long been the core elements in the education of young planners, while the social sciences seldom played a relevant role. This situation changed with the growing number of Italian planning schools, which flourished in the 1990s and kept growing up to a few years ago. During this period, planning and geography developed stronger and stronger bonds, and planning education found a new independence from architectural studies. All in all, the Italian case is

quite different from most English-speaking countries, where planning and geography share a longer history of mutual influence. As a consequence of the recent Italian 'marriage' between planning and geography, we have experienced a stronger attention to social issues and the future challenges of our cities, while still maintaining a common ground with architects on some technical and theoretical debates. Things seem to be at stake in the last five years though, since the turnover cuts in the universities are shutting down many planning schools, especially in Southern Italy, and reducing the multidisciplinary contributions to planning education. Another key issue is the integration of the young graduates in the labor market: with the crisis of funding for planners in public government, the diffusion of planning consultants has drawn the attention of many architects and engineers, who are backed up by stronger and more powerful professional associations. This has caused many problems for young planners trying to find their way into public administration.

6. *Role of the European Union*

A European Urban Policy would be a good chance to practice a form of local planning that could overcome the peculiarities of each single country, and relate instead to shared guidelines. However, there is one thing that would hinder this process in Italy: a relatively outdated procedural system. In particular, in Italy, plans and policies at a broader level, provincial or regional, treat local implementation in terms of *conformance*, meaning that plans, or even projects, at a local level must conform to the broader strategy of the general plan. The main nature of the plan is, consequently, regulatory, usually through a land-use zoning design. In contrast, the EU has developed territorial (spatial) governance processes based on a principle of *performance*. In this approach, what really matters is the ability of the plan to fulfill what the plan itself has promised. All of this leads to the challenge of integrating different management and planning regimes, which mainly refer to a performative model, in a still very conformative planning system. A conformative approach in the implementation of supranational guidelines and plans in local contexts is destined to fail because of the different normative systems between the supranational and the local scales.