

## FROM AGRO-TOWNS TO 'TERRITORIAL POLES' IN THE FRENCH DECADE: REINTERPRETING THE URBAN PROCESSES OF SOUTHERN ITALY IN THE MODERN AGE

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**Abstract:** *This contribution, which references the most accredited literature on the subject, discusses the urban question of modern Southern Italy with all its particular aspects and problems and highlights how the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent French Decade (1806-1815) are a watershed for the formation and consolidation of the urban identity of a number of Southern Italy centres. The question is particularly complex and has been the subject of study in research documented by Sarno (2012). The results of the research pertaining to two pivotal aspects are encapsulated in this paper. The first concerns the peculiarities of the Southern agro-town - called lands - in the Modern Age. The second aspect is the particular significance the French government gave to the cities - between 1806 and 1815 - as central hubs for the state organisation, envisaging them as functional poles. Therefore we intend to show how various towns in Southern Italy tried to construct an urban identity in the modern age, by means of a compromise between the feudal set-up and autonomist urges at first and then thanks to the French presence. Although such attempts were often undermined by the 19<sup>th</sup> century historical-economical processes, they deserve to be examined as representing a fundamental, albeit discontinuous, stage in the urban history of various towns. We need to recommence from such discontinuities in order to fully understand the complexity of the urban phenomenon in Southern Italy, to put into focus the effective identity of several towns and to start up real processes for territorial planning.*

### 1. THE URBAN QUESTION IN MODERN SOUTHERN ITALY

The urban question of Southern Italy has been widely debated over several decades now. In the 1960s the issue was addressed almost simultaneously by Giuseppe Galasso, Francesco Compagna e Lucio Gambi. The former sustained the idea (1969) that the absence of a Commune civilization prevented the development of cities in Southern Italy and that the feudal political approach, from Angioini to the Spanish,

glorified solely the capital city, Naples. Such a standpoint remains a *leitmotiv* from Villari (1984) to Romeo (1990), so summarized by Musi (2000b, p. 7): "The introduction of the feudal regime by the Normans blends in a context characterized by the absence of the commune as a city-state". In his turn, Francesco Compagna even anticipated the origin of the issue: "Apparently, the origins of the crisis, that made the town institutions of Southern Italy palely cede in the XI century, must be sought in the period prior to that of the Normans monarchy advent and the establishment of a rigid form of feudalism. Apparently, the beautiful flowering the cities of Campania (and the Southern ones) seemed to be headed for in the Early Middle Ages was a vain one, gone untested towards powerful opposing forces" (Compagna, 1967, p. 56).

Later studies confirm such a vision, in fact Rombai considers "the age-old and powerful feudal organization as the primary cause for the failed formation of a network of cities which could have added value to the entire territory with its bourgeoisie, as happened in Centre-North of Italy" (Rombai, 2002, p. 195). Therefore, the city in the South of Italy was born "subject", since continually dealing with the central power (Corciulo, 2009). For his part, Lucio Gambi (1965), by studying Calabria centres, wondered whether they were to be considered real towns, highlighting how poor urbanization remained in Southern Italy as a whole. In other words, the lack of autonomy and the absolutist structure of the Kingdom of Naples stigmatised Southern cities, which levelled on a "bureaucratic" status, even after the Unification of Italy, as explained by Talia (2004), thus leaving unchanged the differences between North and South<sup>1</sup>. In fact, the same scholar points out that the disparity existing until the Unity was replaced by the subsequent formation of a denser network but not "less balanced and weak" (Talia, 2007a, p. 118). One of the reasons for such an imbalance is the unsteady and frail development of industrialization. Therefore, the South was late at the appointment with the urban question and with a negative legacy (Dematteis, 2008; D'Aponte, Mazzetti, 2011), but over the last decade it has come up the necessity of a more articulate reinterpretation of the phenomenon, in order to put into focus regional transformations and differentiations (Viganoni, 2007; Sommella, 2008; Amato, 2011). However, it seems equally scientifically urgent to understand the past, in such a way as to focus on urban processes which formed over the *long term*, albeit inconsistently, and clarify paths already begun, though undone by later factors, but still tenaciously present in so many cities' identity.

The Modern age is particularly complex but also interesting because it is the period when a number of towns in Southern Italy try to overcome the condition of inferiority and activate productive processes on a certain level. However such a period is also complex due to the following reasons: the first is demographic, the second juridical and the third one scientific. In the past the demographic factor appeared to be fundamental as for recognizing a town as such, but its importance has to be scaled down because, as showed by the studies collected by Clark (2002a) on small and medium-sized European towns in the Modern age, the functions acquired are more relevant than the mere amount of population. After all, it had already been illustrated by Gambi (1982). The second issue - the juridical one - made the phenomenon difficult to interpret because, for instance, in the Kingdom of Naples there were the royal towns,

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<sup>1</sup> Differences and inadequacies are summarized by the 2008 Report of the Italian Geographical Society in the article *The urban question in Southern Italy* and then addressed again in the 2011 Report dedicated to Southern Italy.

which benefited from a certain extent of autonomy and were directly contingent upon the Crown, but there also were the *lands* on a much larger scale, that is feuds held by noble families and subject to trade. But the *lands*, although in such a condition of inferiority, were still capable of achieving a remarkable productive value, as it will be showed later on. Such an ambiguity is well condensed in some definitions: they are *almost towns* (Chittolini, 1990) or *peasant towns* (Poli, 2004). If you want a summary of a compromise between the feudal system and the productive activities, it seems coherent to their *status* the definition of *urban land*<sup>2</sup> (Sarno, 2012). But it is necessary to put into focus the peculiarities of the *agrotown* in the Modern Age rather than looking for a proper denomination. Finally - third issue - small and medium-sized towns have been ignored for a long time due to the difficulty in gathering data and case studies both in the Italian and European context, as clarified by Clark (2002b), who collects interesting contributions for a reinterpretation of the phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

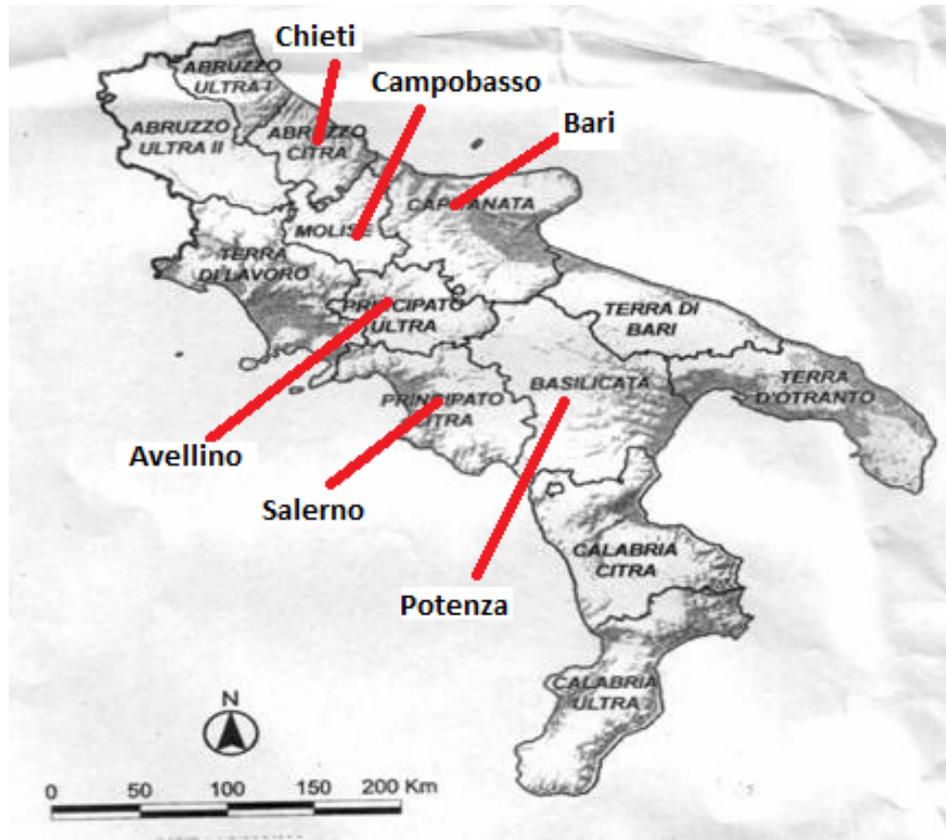
As for Southern Italy, it is opportune to start again from the hefty study of Gerard Labrot (1991) about the cities in Southern Italy in the Modern Age, in which, while stressing their limits, he also pinpoints the *hidden tensions within urban bodies* and how these latter gradually emerge between the XVII and XVIII century, affecting small centers as well. A later collection of works collected by Musi (2000a), focused on a multiplicity of ways and functions realized in the Modern Age, from the urbanization 'cells' in Basilicata to the different layout of *agro-towns* in what is today's Apulia, from small and medium-sized towns of Abruzzi to the *super-rural* entities of Calabria. The curator himself so describes his standpoint: "Southern Italy didn't see the formation of an urban system, but rather developed urban hierarchies according to some typologies and economical, religious, political-administrative and service functions, all linked to the urban settlements" (Musi, 2000b, p. 9). With reference to such an hypothesis, a research has been started, whose results are collected in Sarno (2012), in order to analyze the peculiarities of Southern Italy's urbanization both in the modern era and in the French Decade. It was examined the case of Campobasso in the province of Molise, later broadening the outlook of the research to other cities of the Kingdom of Naples in order to have a significant case study database (fig.1). It has been showed that in the Modern Age several small and medium-sized towns – generally called *lands* – fulfilled a commercial or administrative role and that they achieved an urban identity between the XVII and XVIII century with a different

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<sup>2</sup> In the XVIII century the citizens of some of them pay a release fee to the Royal Inland Revenue and some of the *lands* acquire juridical rank of cities according to the legislation of the Royal Revenue. However they still had to continually deal with the central authority. The formulations adopted for the release were varied: normally the high society people of the *lands* agreed with the Royal Revenue the sum for the release in such a way as not to be subject to a feudatory but directly to the Crown. In many cases the business was conducted by a noble *élite*, which would pay part of the amount, while the remaining sum was collected through the taxation of the whole community. In other cases, the Universities of the cities were free of release and the sum is paid by a group of well-off families.

<sup>3</sup> The volume edited by P. Clark (2002a) presents a broad-spectrum research on a European scale; from the outskirts of small Norwegian towns to small Spanish rural villages, from the cultural role of English towns to the Northern Italy situation. More in detail, he examines the case of small Venetian villages which take advantage of the Verona decadence and bolster farming and early-industrial activities. In a 2009 volume, Clark presents the analysis of the urban phenomenon in Europe from 1400s to 2000, proceeding in accordance with temporal and spatial stages. Inside such a wide and articulate framework, he also reconstructs the urban growth in Modern Age. In this sense, another interesting volume, although dealing with towns generally speaking, is *Urban Historical Geography* by Denecke and Shaw (1988) which gathers the results of a lecture about geo-historical studies on German and English towns, useful for obtaining the necessary indicators to examine the urban space.

time line than other European and Italian regions. Therefore, the French Decade becomes a fundamental political event for Southern Italy because it values the urban space and allows such towns to achieve full autonomy.



**Figure 1.** The Kingdom of Naples in the eighteenth century. The signaled towns have been studied (our elaboration by Petrocelli, 1995)

## 2. URBAN LANDS

As anticipated, various agro-towns and *urban lands* formed in Southern Italy. But what are the *lands*? They were small towns governed by lords who could sell or buy them. Such a phenomenon, begun in the Middle Ages, lasts over the entire Modern Age. Even if it had been overcome the medieval phase when every *land* was a *benefit* and all goods and individuals were subject to the lord, in some European areas the development of a modern state had already reached a compromise with the barony which had a deep influence on the financial management. Hence the lord ran the internal affairs of the *lands* but he wasn't able to govern in an authoritarian way because he had to compromise with local social forces. Such is the way modern feudalism is put into effect in Southern Italy<sup>4</sup>. This is absolutely congruent with a Kingdom where

<sup>4</sup> The issue of the difference between modern and medieval feudalism is discussed by Musi, 2007. According to different studies, the French way of a complete centralization of the State is differentiated from the Polish one of mediation and compromise with the barony.

“no contrast processes happened to take place between the fulfillment of a sole and indivisible sovereignty and feudal persistence” because “relations between them were rather founded on an osmosis and a complex network of collusion and collisions.” (Musi, 2007, p. 37). The *lands* became the hybrid fruit of the modern feudalism well-established here. The documents which attest such forms of compromises and contrasts are the “*apprezzi*”: evaluations made by Royal Revenue experts to estimate the economic value of the *lands*. It comes out that middle classes of every *land*, mostly artisans and merchants, try to join forces to withstand the absolute power of the local lord. In many cases the local authority of the town was halfway between the feudal power and the well-off families' will. But the most important aspect is another one: some *lands* slowly come to have a role as commercial hubs in their rural areas, thanks to a merchant class capable of emerging, despite the systematic control exercised by the lords and in some cases even with the help of the religious associations.

Therefore it happens that artisans and merchants are able to erode the feudal power and grow in the shadow of the lord until, due to such a compromise, they implement another possibility offered by the Kingdom of Naples legislation: releasing the towns. In fact, various communities release their towns in the XVIII century, from Ariano to Amalfi, from Isernia to Salerno and Campobasso (Cirillo, 2008). This way, they weren't contingent upon the lord anymore but directly upon the Crown. Campobasso, in the province of Molise, is an emblematic case of such a path. It consolidates, despite momentary periods of difficulty, its role as a hinterland hub for transhumance and becomes a reference point for the neighbouring towns. Its geographic position becomes the cornerstone for the development of craftsmanship, commercial and trade activities. Such a geo-economical consolidation allows Campobasso's artisans and merchants to limit the feudatory's power first and then to commit themselves for the release in order to give to Campobasso the proper juridical status of city in 1700s (Sarno 2012). Even there where this process doesn't take place, like in Avellino, the ruling noble family of the town, Caracciolo, fosters the commercial and urban development of the town. This town, equal to any other Southern feuds, reaches an urban identity anyhow, but in a different way because the farsighted nobles presence leaves no room for any release options. Therefore one can say that some towns had the opportunity to overcome their subjection in various ways and became social-economic centres of reference in their territories, experiencing forms of autonomy.

### **3. URBAN POLICY IN THE FRENCH DECADE (1806 – 1815)**

When the French<sup>5</sup> occupy Naples (1806), they pay particular attention to cities as pivotal centers of the State organization, considering them as functional poles connected to the surrounding territory as for administrative, commercial and judicial functions. Such a vision complements with urban expansions and foundations of new

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<sup>5</sup> In 1805 Napoleon Bonaparte becomes King of Italy and in 1806 Joseph Napoleon sets himself up as lord of Naples, then replaced by Murat from 1808 to 1815. In the previous period (1797 – 1804) the Cisalpine Republic and the Neapolitan Republic were established by Napoleonic army. The King of Naples, Ferdinand IV, retreats in Sicily when French arrive in 1806.

towns which had been increasing in Europe since the second half of the 1700s. The reformatory environment and the population growth were very valid reasons for constructing functional buildings and the demolition of ancient areas. However, the renewal process has its start in 1806 with the new Geo-administrative reorganization<sup>6</sup>.

“What characterized the Napoleonic Decade, not only in Southern Italy but all over the peninsula, was the explicitly urban feature of the interventions that reshaped Italian cities, rationalizing them. One can therefore claim that an urban policy for administration was developed back then for the first time and that according to which the *abbellissement* of the city was also functional to gaining the consent of the people” (Corciulo, 2009, pp. 114-115). The Napoleonic thus carry out the urban process which was *in fieri* in Southern Italy by overturning the feudal regime. *Napoleonic Know-how* (Batson et al., 2011) consolidates the positive social-economic trends realized over the course of the XVIII century.

The most vibrant towns, which had already put into practice the aforementioned process, are chosen as county seats or because of specific functions<sup>7</sup>. The French government don't restrict themselves to this but foster a planning fervour for an urban renewal. In this manner, towns “get rid of walls and doors”, “see expansion processes” and, in its whole, “the urban scene changes<sup>8</sup>”. (Spagnoletti, 2009b, pp. 15-17), according to the Enlightenment vision striving for inserting territories into models and hierarchies (Verdier, 2008). Looking at the urban plans you can notice some common *leitmotivs*: the construction of squares, roads and houses. In other words, Napoleon's men are “dwarfs on giants' shoulders”: they gather the heritage of previous decades and give their own *imprimatur* which is put into practice by means of a synergy between administrative recognition and urban reinterpretation. Such a synergy is a game changer for many Southern towns, from those in the Molise province – Campobasso, Isernia and Termoli – to Bari, Avellino, Potenza and Chieti, albeit with different outcomes (Sarno 2012). The changes Napoleonic put into practice reflect the conception according to which cities must be hubs functional to the territory so their structure and corresponding embellishments must be adequate. They consider fundamental some buildings such as the seat for town administration, the hospital, the jail, the botanical garden and the boarding school as a place for a laical education. Besides, new burgs are designed with residential modules for houses, offices and shops. In Avellino, designated county seat of the Ultra Principality, they start the construction of new buildings, roadworks, botanical gardens under the illustrious leading figure of the engineer Luigi Oberty (De Cunzo, De Martini, 1985). Besides, they implement particular public buildings such as the jail, the palace of the Superintendence, the Royal College, the cemetery. Instead, in the city of Salerno, designated county seat of the Citra Principality, the French consolidate manufacturing and commercial activities

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<sup>6</sup> The French administration puts the kingdom through a regionalization process and a new hierarchy of territorial spaces (Spagnoletti, 2009b). It reshapes the geography of Southern provinces and identifies a county seat for each of them thanks to the support of French technicians who provide their work, as showed by Rossi (2008) for the La Spezia gulf, but in the same time Italian technicians are trained and this was of great importance to the new regime, which establishes dedicated schools.

<sup>7</sup> Reference for urban renewal between the second half of 1700s and early 1800s are Bairoch (1988), who connects urban development to industrialization beginning, Lees and Lees (2007), who address the topic on a European scale and De Seta (2011), who describes the architectural aspects. Because of the urban slant typical of the Napoleonic era, the Morachiello e Teyssot (1983) essay remains fundamental. Interesting the volume edited by Rossi (2008) about Napoleon and the Gulf of La Spezia and Sarno (2012) about Southern Italy.

<sup>8</sup> Spagnoletti (2009a) analyzes the changes that take place in the Decade in Bari, Lecce, Potenza, Chieti.

(Cirillo, 2009). In Potenza, new county seat of the Basilicata province, they devise a master development plan, the construction of an aqueduct and the demolition of some areas of the town. However works proceed slowly because the notables of the town don't consent the beginning of such activities (Pedio, 1982). This is the proof that for a real renewal the government intervention is not sufficient, but it is necessary the involvement of the local ruling class. In fact, this latter plays a significant role in the changes that took place in Abruzzi. Brancaccio (2009) here examines the case for Chieti where local notables gradually get enthusiastic for the new regime and the city is partially expanded. In short, the cases here reported show how impositions from above weren't sufficient but it was necessary a synergy between the emerging social classes and the French government. It is no coincidence that the ruling class of the Molise province feels a particular inspiration towards the Murat government and realizes changes that spread from chief town - Campobasso - to other towns. However, in Isernia, which had suffered heavy damage in the 1805 earthquake, single works are done, among which the reclamation of the cathedral.

Their focus on Termoli was put into practice through projects for the expansion of the town and the construction of the harbor which would be implemented over the course of the XIX century. Effective and immediate interventions take place only in Campobasso where a new burg is built, called Murat burg. The city thus carries out the positive social-economic process mentioned before. Such a positive trend happens in Bari as well, where the construction of a new burg is begun, always thanks to Murat. In this case it is no coincidence either since the renewal of the urban space is a praise for this city capable of prevailing economically over other cities of the same area, such as Barletta or Trani (Corciulo, 2009; Spagnoletti, 2009b). Therefore at the beginning of 1800s several Southern cities consolidate the autonomy processes earlier ignited and define their urban identity through the expansion and the embellishment of their urban structures. One can say that new urban adornments, like buildings and square, finally transmit a real urban culture in Southern Italy. It is also necessary to add that, even where Napoleonic cannot realize significant structural renewals, they are still bringers of a new vision of the urban dimension.

#### **4. CONCLUDING REMARKS: PECULIARITY OF SOUTHERN URBANISM IN THE MODERN AGE**

As tried to show, first by means of a compromise between feudalism and autonomy driving forces, then thanks to the French presence, various towns of Southern Italy tried to build up an urban identity in the modern age. One could rebut that such compromises represent the negative legacy still burdening Southern urbanism, but they pave the way for interpreting the phenomenon coherently in its specificity and peculiarity. As clarified by Galasso, "Southern Italy, contrary to a deep-rooted thought denying it, had its cities, like the rest of the Mediterranean (which is home for cities, so to speak) and Europe. But it had its kind of cities, those that its history, its cultural, social and civil structure permitted and required, out of a static and external pattern."(Galasso, 2011b, p. X). Certainly it happened over the course of 1800s that the development based on commercial activities wasn't able to reshape itself and blend in the industrial processes in these cities and in other European ones (Bateman, 2007).

They often had difficulties, and still have, both in acting as a real beacon of their reference area and in integrating in new national and international relations. But it cannot be ignored that the urban identity experience marked some communities. Furthermore, although the results achieved in 1700s and in the French Decade were often shaken by historic and economic processes between 1800 and 1900, they deserve to be examined inasmuch representing a pivotal stage of the urban history, albeit discontinuous, of many towns. From such a discontinuity we need to restart to fully comprehend the complexity of the urban phenomenon in Southern Italy and to put into focus the real identity of many cities. Although in Southern urban areas a continuous negotiation went on between a policy of centralization and entrepreneur urges, in such conditions the idea of city in Southern Italy was moulded anyhow (Sarno, 2014). Such idea, as outlined, ended up assuming a different aspect on a case-by-case basis, for which punctual and *bottom-up* analyses are requested. Case studies will put into focus how different social forces eroded the feudal power, what network of economic relationships succeeded in giving birth to the modern day activism. Above all, we could understand the urban culture in Southern Italy still awaited even today, a kind of expectation that has its origins precisely in the processes and experimentations of the modern age. Only if such a scenario will be properly reconstructed, a real territorial planning for Southern Italy cities is going to be put into practice.

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