

The Italian Cities as Nodes of local and global Networks

Introduction

The crisis of the Fordist model, the expansion of a new economic model, the institutional reforms carried out in the last decade (with regard to the principle of subsidiarity) and the construction of the European Union have favoured the weakness of the nation-states.

Moreover, the phenomena of globalisation has allowed territorial interconnections to be created - through flows and networks - that exceed the time-space barrier and elude the isolation of the local systems (Harvey, 1990), producing in this way processes of territorial reorganisation and rearticulation, within that "the level and the role of the territoriality are redefined, eroding the national level as the context for self-contained socio-economic relationships and, simultaneously, intensifying the importance of supra- and infra-national levels and forms of territory organisation" (Governato, Salone, 2002, p. 2).

In consequence of this, the institutional territories have lost their traditional power, that has been acquired instead by those territories whose borders are traced artificially through networks of relations among local actors.

Some authors have spoken about this dynamics in terms of re-scaling processes (Brenner, 1999), territorial recomposition (Vanier, 1999), emerging of local territorial system (Dematteis, 2001) pointing out the actual advantage in terms of economic politics for the extreme levels (local and global) and the disadvantage for the intermediate institutions, the nation-states. As a matter of fact, the local dimension had directly access to the economic global sphere: "The globalisation of trade and monetary flow implies that their economies are no longer embedded in a national economy. Economic globalisation signifies the increasing mobility of capital, and therefore, to a degree, the possibility of breaking free of spatial constraints. Paradoxically, this release goes along with an increased awareness of territory, of cities in particular, as potential contexts for investment and for living. This signifies a new phase in the development of capitalism, whereby capitalism itself gains an advantage over national states" (Bagnasco, Le Galès, 2000, p. 19).

So, these dynamics have led to the economic and political scene *new* actors provided with an always increasing power in the comparisons of the nation-states. In particular, a significant role has been taken on by the *global enterprises* - "un nuovo soggetto di relazioni e connessioni 'non statali' in reti transnazionali più che in politiche industriali solidamente incastrate in sistemi regionali" (Perulli, 1998, p. 27) - which through network organisations are able to establish relations with the sub-national level without interacting with nation-states; the *regions*, meant as places in which the reconstruction of economic politics, the reforms of the nation-state and European politics converge; the *cities or metropolitan areas*, describable as nodes of multiple transterritorial networks, which are characterized from the presence of diversified activities (Veltz, 1998).

This plurality of actors has favoured competition among territories, regions and cities, that alternatively in different contexts take on a sure affirmation in economic and political sectors. According to Bagnasco and Le Galès (2000, p. 3), "in this context of the movement towards economic globalisation that challenges traditional forms of equilibrium, cities are now subject to significant centrifugal forces. Nevertheless – and this is our fundamental tenet – cities remain significant tiers of social and political organisation".

In other words, we are not faced with a passage of power from cities and regions to Brussels, but it is important to reflect on the fact that in Europe a policentric government is rising, within which local, regional and European national actors interact among them.

So, the role of the city is confirmed, but much depends on the ability of the cities - or better on the capabilities of the local governments – to interact with the global events in order to strengthen, more over, their role.

This paper moves from this point of view to describe the actual networking among Italian cities in order to cope with the global challenges, starting from the following hypothesis:

- the Italian cities can be considered middle-sized cities in comparison with numerous large cities in the global world. According to Bagnasco and Le Galés (2000, p. 12), “Without wishing to impugn the existence of a globalisation rationale (...) it seems to us that a model which is a mix of ‘global city’, ‘information city’, ‘entrepreneurial post-Fordist city’ and ‘dual city’ (...) would give an adequate account of the reality of European cities and of their transformation. (...) A fundamental characteristic of Europe is that there are far fewer such metropolises; they are the exception not the rule. London and Paris can be probably classes ad global cities even if there are some questions about what ‘global city’ means. (...) The larger European conurbations that come in mind as the Ruhr, Ranstad, Roma, Berlin or Milan are largely composed of cities in the customary European sense and organised around cities”.
- the impact of globalisation has increased competition among territories but also the *cooperation* among actors: “cities have reacted against the separation between global networks and local context by seeking to present themselves in their whole as node of networks. Some cities tend to reaffirm their role in directing and governing economic and territorial processes within an area that is not only circumscribed to their centre of gravity and influence, but to a set of cities, a network of cities, a ‘network of horizontal relationship’. Cities establish tangible and intangible linkages both downstream to their local subjects and upstream to the national and international levels” (Rossignolo, 2002, p. 3).
- cities can be described as political and social actors (Le Galés, 1998), that establish not only in their inside local networks but also outside sovra- and trans-local networks in order to valorise the endogenous potentialities, to compete at global level and to improve the position in the urban and territorial hierarchy. On this base, the local governments try to carry out economic competitive politics leveraging on their local resources to promote itself outside and to compete with other territories. So, the local resources represent the *competitive advantages*, on which to base the local politics, in the measure in which these resources are specific - they cannot be reproduced when we want, as they are a result of a social construction - and located - they are in a territory and cannot be transferred, if not with high costs and long times.

The Italian urban systems: an analysis in terms of regional patterns

To cope with the global challenges the cities have take on the role of nodes of strategic networks in order to attract flows of information, innovation, services, etc. to assure to themselves an economic development. “In this way, however, the development and the transformations of towns comes to depend increasingly on supralocal and tendentially global network organizations (transnational corporations, financial institutions, research networks, etc.) Their ‘anchorage’ in urban contexts does not involve the whole town in the same way. The opportunities and the opulence of some parts and of some social groups grow very quickly, while others are excluded and feed the spiral of degradation, poverty and social deviancy. (...) Towns have reacted against this separation between global networks and local contexts by seeking to present them-selves in their ensemble as nodes of network” (Dematteis, Rossignolo, 1997, p. 272). From this point of view, the cities should be considered *at the same time* as parts of territories, in which local societies are rooted, and nodes of global networks.

Focusing the attention on the Italian context, a research (Bonavero, Dematteis, Sforzi, 1999) has tried to translate this theoretical configurations into empirical analysis in order to provide a framework of the relations among Italian urban systems, starting from the hypotesis that actually the concept of the city is not related to an entity constituted by institutional borders -

clearly defined and correspondent to a precise territory - but it is in relation with the concept of urban system¹.

The concept of urban system - elaborated at the end of the Sixties in England within the studies carried out on the logic of Daily Urban System (DUS) - is thought to recognise different basins of pendularity and then the spaces of auto-containment of the house-work flows. It is referred to the concept of wide-area, that is an area bigger than regions less urbanised and smaller than a metropolis, in which relations of complementary and functionality between core and belt exist.

In other words, the concept of urban system “emerges as a time-space local concentration of population and economic activities that together form a relatively self-contained organisation of daily relations of interdependence. (...) As the dominant daily activity is labour, the urban system that satisfies the criterion of daily self-containment is considered in practice as being constituted by the system of localities where economic activities are found and where the people who work there live. In this sense, the boundaries that identify the urban daily system coincide with those of the local labour market area, and for this reason the latter aspect is often emphasised in the name it is given. This defined, the urban system represent the local level of the national urban system and may constitute nodes in a multitude of networks of supra-local connections” (Sforzi, 1999, p. 20). Summing up, the urban system can be described as a complex of locality that interact among them in a auto-contained way.

Taking into account this theoretical concept, the research presents a possible classification of the Italian urban systems on the base of an analysis carried out with regard to two types of spatial relations:”

- 1) long-distance ones, in which the local urban system acts as a ‘node’ of supra-regional networks of interaction, that we shall refer to in brief as network relations;
- 2) relations of physical proximity, by which the local urban system interacts at the regional and sub-regional scale with the closest local urban systems, that we shall refer to as territorial relations.

The first belong to a virtual space (or global network space), in which the interactions are influenced little, if at all, by physical distance; they reflect the division of labour at the supra-regional scale and thus indicate the *degree of globalisation* of the local urban systems. The second type of relations occur in a territorial space where the ‘friction of distance, physical forms (high land, plains, coasts, etc.) and historical legacies have a significant influence; they reflect *the degree of regional cohesion* of the local urban systems. Although acting on different levels and in different ways, these two groups of relations do not rule each other out, but, as we shall see, interact in their perspective spheres: the network interactions transform the physical space and the structures of the latter condition network connections” (Dematteis, p.134).

In the research, the classification of the Italian urban systems in terms of regional patterns is proposed as result of the analysis of these two spatial relations through specific indicators able to measure the degree of functional openness (globalisation) of the local urban system and the degree of regional cohesion.

In particular, this is what comes out from the analysis:

- a) the Italian urban systems meant as nodes of regional networks present different degrees of regional cohesion (Fig. 1). Classified in order of better regional cohesion, there are:
 - *metropolitan functional regions*, monocentric structures where smaller urban systems gravitate on metropolitan urban systems (Torino, Milano, Roma, Napoli);
 - *urban functional regions*, smaller than the first ones and constituted by a multi-polar structure (Trieste and Udine area) or by a structure “where the metropolitan and urban

¹ “Ciò che differenzia un insieme da un sistema sta proprio nel fatto che il primo si definisce attraverso la somma delle parti ed è conoscibile a partire dai suoi singoli elementi; mentre il sistema, per via di definizione, esprime un comportamento globale che è diverso da quello dei suoi singoli elementi, e perciò è conoscibile essenzialmente a partire dallo studio delle relazioni che fra questi sussistono” (Martellato, Sforzi, 1980, p. 12).

functional regions are connected together by a dense and articulated settlement pattern on various functional levels, linked by relations of hierarchy and complementary” (id. p. 138) such as the area from Parma to the Adriatic, Northern Tuscany and Po Valley;

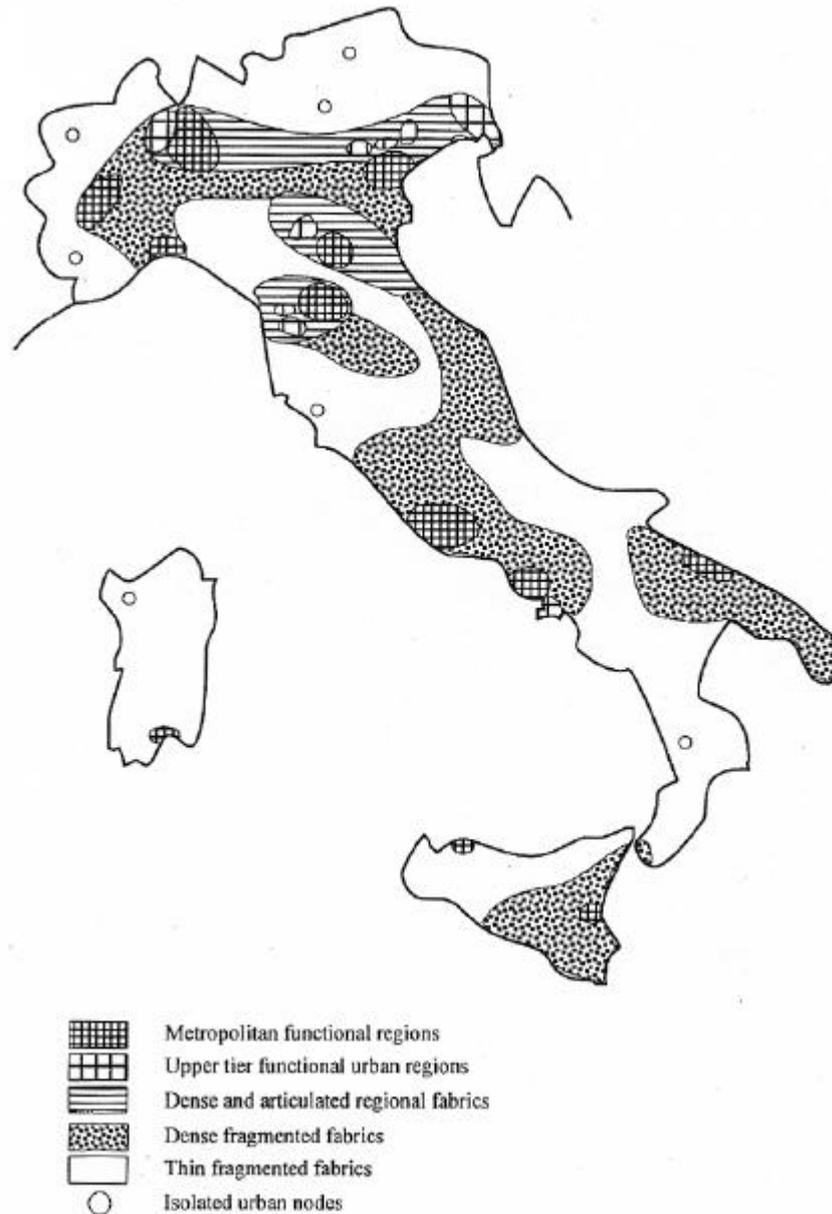


Fig. 1 Regional urban structures and types of settlement fabric (Dematteis, 1999)

- *dense fragmented fabrics*, in which the mesh of the urban systems does not present the same intensity of connections among the nodes;
 - *thin fragmented fabrics* correspondent to vast peripheral or marginal zone where the mesh is not only fragmented – as in the previous case – but also thinner and discontinuous with few relatively *isolated urban nodes*.
- b) the Italian urban systems take on different configurations, defined by the combination between the degree of regional cohesion of urban systems and the degree of globalisation. Configuration classified in order of better combination are (Fig. 2):

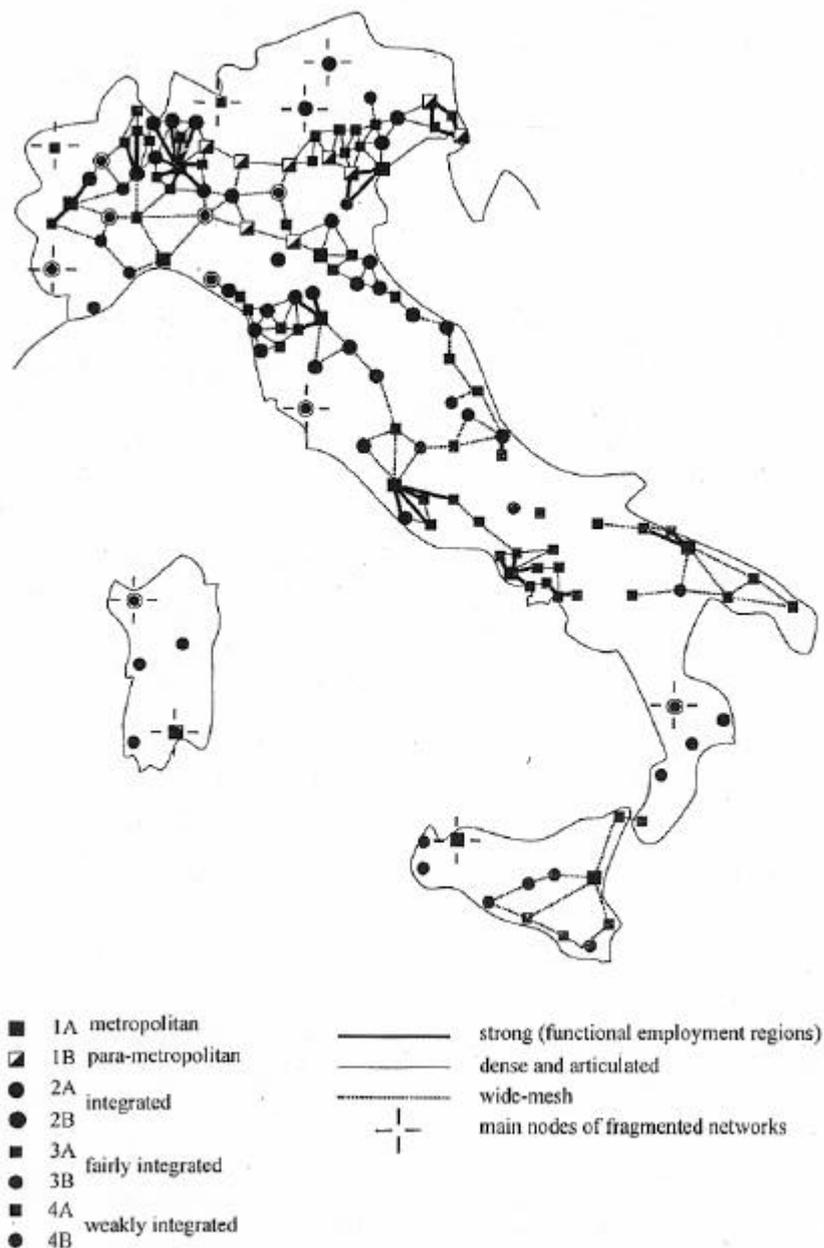


Fig. 2 Regional patterns of the major urban systems (Dematteis, 1999)

- *metropolitan systems* (Milan, Rome, Florence, Turin, Bologna, Bari, Naples, Palermo, Venice, Cagliari, Catania and Genoa);
- *para-metropolitan systems*, which are smaller than the first ones, but in some cases they have the same degree of network and territorial interaction of the first ones (Padua, Vicenza, Brescia, Bergamo, Udine, Trieste, Parma and Modena);
- *integrated urban systems*, which can be part of metropolitan surroundings or articulated regional systems (Centre-North Italy) or poles of peripheral regions (as Perugia, Ancona, Bolzano);

- *integrated urban systems with a weak territorial component*, which have a weakness in territorial cohesion compared to the relatively high levels of supra-regional interactions (some cases in Centre-North Italy);
- *fairly integrated urban systems*, which include urban systems of metropolitan surroundings, urban systems with a strong manufacturing or tourism specialisation and some urban systems that are poles of sub-regional importance;
- *fairly integrated urban systems with a weak territorial component*, in which territorial integration is less than network integration;
- *weakly integrated urban systems*, which include urban systems belonging to metropolitan surroundings or with sub-regional territorial functions usually more important than network functions (South Italy);
- *very weakly integrated urban systems*, which present a very weak access to supra-local network and a very limited role in territorial organisation.

Conclusion

From the previous description of the Italian urban systems in terms of regional patterns, it is possible to put on evidence some more general issues.

1. The concept of urban network has to be interpreted with a double sense: in metaphoric sense, referred to interconnections between places and subjects independently from the infrastructures or other physical characteristics of linkages; and in literal sense to indicate physical infrastructures like streets, ports, airports, railway stations, etc. (Brunet, 1998). Although the globalisation has allowed the creation of territorial interconnections, that exceed time-space barriers, *the urban systems are not unhooked by the territory*. As a matter of fact, the presence of physical networks represent a necessary component of milieu to solder and to strengthen the link between physical and virtual space. So, in the networking among cities not only the virtual networks play a significant role, as holder of flows of relations, but also the physical one. This is evident in those territorial contexts devoid of adequate physical infrastructure of linkages that consequently remain outside from important networks of relations.
2. Physical networks and other endogenous potentialities, present in an urban system and which are individuated and recognised by the local subjects as components of their specific territorial milieu, constitute *that set of opportunities/resources* on which local governments can leverage to carry on politics of territorial development and on which local subjects can construct territorial connections of the virtual space. So, speaking about the networking among cities to make the substance of urban regions, it is necessary to take into account that a wider milieu exist than the local one, *the metropolitan milieu*, composed by all that conditions useful to implement processes of development at a supra-local level.
3. The existence of urban networks, directed at the construction of urban regions, puts in crisis the traditional instruments of territorial government and development. As a matter of fact, the traditional instruments, thought to regulate relations of passive territoriality, compressed in institutional borders, are not able to answer to the actual requirement of territorial governance. Today, the instruments for metropolitan areas and regions must be thought *to promote relations of active territoriality* in contexts *à la geometrie variable*. From this point of view, the new instruments of territoriality regulation enter into the optic of the Strategic plan, Patti Territoriali and so on.
4. The vertical geographical relations (between the subjects and the local milieu) and the horizontal geographical relations (between subjects) of an urban system do not represent the sufficient conditions to produce competitive advantages. The competitive advantages of the cities depend still on the relations with the regional structure. In other words in the "production" of competitive advantages by the cities, a significant role is carried out by the degree of *regional cohesion*, meant as *potential condition to support networks relations*.

Focusing the attention on specific situations on the Italian context, it is possible to point out that the Italian urban networks are more developed and reveal a major degree of cohesion in those cases where the middle sized cities show typical characteristics of the local system of small and middle businesses, meant as local system linked to specific components of local milieu. As a matter of fact, the globalisation, favouring the competition between territories, has put on evidence from one side the role of the local resources, like competitive advantages, and from the other one the role of the local actors, like subjects able to auto-organised themselves and to co-operate in order to use the equipment available, to transform it into exportable values and to attract exogenous resources. In this way, the local development is thought to be a combination between vertical relation (with local milieu), horizontal relation at local and supra-local level.

For these reasons, the Italian urban systems with higher level of regional cohesion can be considered the result of "aggregation" processes: they are not isolated, but they are linked to other cities which are physically near to them through relations of proximity. Beyond that they are connected to supra-local level through relations of networks. According to Dematteis (1997, p. 10), "l'interazione tra città vicine che porta alla formazione di reti regionali, ha effetti sinergici che favoriscono l'accesso dei singoli 'nodi' alle reti globali. Tale effetto è particolarmente evidente là dove la rete regionale si forma attorno ad un sistema metropolitano".

A strong regional cohesion in territories with reticular meshes at high connectivity represents for the Italian middle sized cities an advantage, as in the case of the metropolitan regional system of Milan where a fabric of dense, articulated and dynamic meshes of synergy and complementarity constitute a fertile field to formulate politics of networks at regional and sub-regional scale.

So, the patterns of the regional development seems to pass more and more through regional metropolitan networks set up by voluntary aggregations of subject that co-operate on territorial development projects. In this way, the territories of the development are defined by networks of local and global relations: the local governmentc interconnect themselves "to resolve the problems that the global networks do not succeed in resolving. From passive networking there is the development of active networking, supported by the political institutions of European, national and regional level" (Dematteis, Rossignolo, 1997, p. 272).

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