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a cura di Carlo Cellamare

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Evolutions and permanences in the politics (and policy) of informality: notes on the roman case

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In this brief article I intend to discuss evolutions and permanences in the field of the “politics and policy of informality” in the Roman context. Others on these same pages have already discussed the historical roots of the phenomena (see Cellamare in this issue). In the economy of this short essay it suffices to recall how, according to the literature, the actual development of borgate in the post-war era mostly followed a pattern in which land-owners excluded from development opportunities by urban planning decisions made their land available, through the establishment of a somehow “parallel” land market, to lower-class internal migrants and natives who could not access formal housing given the shortage of affordable options both in the private and in the public sectors. Once in control of the land, these individuals would develop it mostly in the form of self-built and self-designed single-family homes in the context of village-like spatial configurations – the borgate – serviced by some self-built basic infrastructures (Berlinguer and Della Seta, 1976 and 1988; Clemente and Perego, 1983, Cremaschi, 1994; Zanfi, 2008). Over the time, this parallel land and real-estate market increased both in scope and sophistication with the involvement of a wide range of mediators and professionals and the inclusion of a middle-class demand (Clemente and Perego, 1983). The “informal” nature of borgate was therefore manifold: it implied the illegal subdivision and marketization of land that was not planned for private development, the actual building of homes with no involvement of city planning and with no respect of housing regulations, the resort to labor and design services on the “black market” and, last but not least, the lack of security of tenure on behalf of the inhabitants. Soon, informal housing and urbanism became a relevant political matter at the local level coming to play a very important role in the shaping of post-war local.

Politicizing informality

Starting with the 1950s, *Borgate* became the scene for the political activism of the Left and especially of the Italian Communist Party (Pci). Through a complex and innovative set of newly founded urban actors – among which the most important was “Unione borgate” - Pci was able to establish its political and electoral hegemony over the informal settlements leading to the formation of a “red belt” “besieging” the middle-upper class and conservative neighborhoods located in the “formal”

city (Coppola, 2008). The Roman left – with a leading role of Pci and its wider organizational milieu - framed its increasingly influential local campaigns recurring to sociological interpretations that saw informality as the outcome of a backward economic and social structure based on the extraction of urban rent more than on the making of industrial profits. The entrenchment of a dualistic organization of the city between a middle/upper class and relatively serviced centre and a lower-class deprived - and very often informal - periphery was seen as the most striking spatial outcome of the hegemony of the “Blocco edilizio” over city politics (Violante, 2008).

The goal of PCI was therefore to build a new urban coalition meant to be alternative to the “Blocco Edilizio” and to its policies. At the core of the agenda proposed by this coalition in-the-making was the solution of the “housing question” through a new strategy made of increased control of private production, the repression of illegal land subdivisions and large investments in public housing. Policies aimed at including borgate in the city structural plan – as already done for some of them by a Democrazia Cristiana (DC) led administration in the mid-1960s – and at bringing infrastructures and services to them were included in this strategy as well (Coppola, 2008). This agenda will gain momentum in the mid-1970s when Pci – thank, in particular, to an electoral landslide in the *borgate* – was able to form a new progressive majority at the City Council. Once sized power, coherently with its agenda, the Left put in place a set of spatially and socially redistributive policies aimed at making available - to the borgate residents and to other underprivileged social groups - those “urban rights” in the form of opportunities of “collective consumption” (Castells, 1977; Katznelson, 1992) that, according to the progressive narrative, had previously been denied to them. In the context of a corporatist agreement with private developers – an agreement that was presented as being alternative to the previously dominant mechanism of production of the urban presided by the “Blocco Edilizio” - this goal was achieved primarily through the provision of basic physical and social infrastructure in the existing informal areas and through the realization of new public housing schemes (Coppola, 2008).

A not so small Desotian experiment

Besides letting disadvantaged urban groups to access a better quality of life through public intervention, the new power could not ignore the issue of tenure and of planning legitimacy that was posed by informality. Following previous limited interventions, the Left reformed the structural plan of the city including informal settlements. Later, in 1980, a regional law promoted by a PCI-led administration addressed for the first time the problem of tenure prospecting the issue of property titles to the residents of borgate. The law was also meant to give a more stable legal basis to the mentioned planning choices implemented by the city

administration. This provision became fully effective only in 1985 with the approval of new national legislation, the so-called “Condono edilizio”, that gave individuals the possibility to fully legalize their properties in exchange of a fee (Berdini, 2010; Zanfi, 2013). On their part, as already experienced in Rome under PCI rule, city administrations had to implement regeneration plans aimed at realizing basic infrastructures and services accordingly to established national planning regulations.

The *condono* represented a fundamental moment in the history of planning and housing policy in Rome, a moment whose effects on the social and economic structure of the city have probably been underestimated. “Condono” undoubtedly became one of the most relevant channels – in 1985, over 400.000 condono requests were filed in the city (Berdini, 2010) – through which the lower classes could actually access homeownership. At a micro-scale, in the social trajectory of many “informals” with little or no economic and cultural capital, *condono* played a dramatic role allowing the almost instant creation of significant financial wealth: through the granting of property titles – that were acquired under exceptionally favorable conditions - hundreds of thousands Roman families came in possession of a “fungible asset” usable as a “collateral” in any financial transactions, entered the real-estate market as suppliers of assets whose values were steadily and consistently appreciating throughout the years and established flourishing family economies built around the inter-generational transmission of housing or of capitals created through the commodification of housing (Coppola, 2012).

We can safely state that the *condono* and the just mentioned effects on the social trajectories of its beneficiaries deeply changed the *politics of informality*. Among urban critics, some saw in it the source of a wide even if “distorted” democratization in the access to urban rent well beyond the perimeters of the traditional actors participating to the “Blocco Edilizio”, others saw in it the origin of a further entrenchment in the privatization of urban rent and a deadly *vulnus* to hopes of reform in the field of land regulation and urban planning. Beyond these judgments of value, critics underscored also how, in the world of the now former *informals*, representations of social integration and mobility – and related patterns of collective action – became less centred around those rights of social reproduction in the form of collective consumption opportunities that had been at the core of the progressive agenda and more centered around opportunities related to the accumulation of wealth through the integration in the circuits of real estate capitalism. Coherently, in the field of socio-spatial representation, *borgate* ceased to be a “space of exception” – a dystopian condition that was also the ground for the successful organization of the ones who were subjected to this same dystopian condition – to become a gradually “normalized” space that was integrated into the “ordinary city” and its political and economic workings.

Playing with property-based urban citizenship

If all this is true, we can state that the experience of the progressive hegemony over the politics of informality ended in a (at least apparent) paradox. The *condono*, in fact, made the city of Rome the site for a mass experimentation of the theories regarding formalization of informal assets elaborated by neo-liberal thinker Hernando De Soto (De Soto, 1989, 2002). De Soto saw formal titling as a key opportunity to convert what he would famously define “dead capital” - properties and economic activities placed on informal markets - into “living capital” - assets that, having accessed formality, could in turn generate capital. Overall, for De Soto, urban marginality could be turned around through the expansion of individual property – to include informal assets – and not through their retreat.

In many ways, the *condono* – and the regeneration policies that introduced it – even if not explicitly, pursued such a vision with remarkable consistence. In the context of the very dynamic political climate of the 1990s, with a “modernized” and now post-communist Left back to power at city hall, the former “informal” homeowner – the *condonato* - will therefore become the key actor in the context of a new round of policy and planning experimentations regarding the *borgate*. This new round of policy was based on the acknowledgment of the fact that the previous-one had obtained only limited success: while the *condono* procedures - even if slow and cumbersome - were successfully granting ownership to the informals closing the controversy with the state, the local regeneration plans had proven to be very slow and somehow ineffective in upgrading the overall “urban quality” of the *borgate*.

The central idea will be to fix the problem investing in innovative governance solutions aimed at directly mobilizing owners in urban regeneration processes. In 1997, a city ordinance gave *borgate*'s property owners the opportunity to deposit the fees related to the “*condono*” directly in the coffers of newly founded associations – named “*Consorzi di auto-recupero*” – instead than in the city central budget (Cellamare, 2010). *Consorzi* had to be formed by the owners who wished to join them within a specific area – defined on the basis of previous zoning decision – and had to be guided by a democratically elected leadership. With the proceedings of the fees, “*Consorzi*” had to design and implement projects aimed at filling the gap in terms of basic urban infrastructures and services that still affected many *borgate*, taking this responsibility away from the city government. This new device was presented as having a participative rationale – to involve residents in the ideation and construction of infrastructures – as long a “localist” and efficientist one – residents could be sure that their resources were actually funding projects in their areas in a way that eluded the weight of bureaucratic procedures.

According to critics, results of this new policy have been mixed: the implementation of projects has often been relatively slow despite its efficientist rhetoric while participation levels too have been often negligible (Cellamare, 2010; Coppola, 2013). Moreover, the actual workings of this new governance device have raised significant controversy even on a legal

level: some *consorzi* did not limit themselves to the “harvest” of the condono fees within their assigned perimeters and went after them in other areas of the city while; at the same time, they also raised fees from new developments happening both inside and outside their areas (Coppola, 2013).

Beyond (and before) neoliberalism

Almost fifty years after the first zoning ordinance that acknowledged the existence of informally urbanized areas within city limits, *borgate* – as in the case of *asientamentos informales* in Hernando De Soto’s Lima – have the highest home-ownership rates on the record in the city but, at the same time, are still subject to a very consistent gap in terms of overall “urban quality” (AIC and Unione Borgate, 2010). From this point of view, if it’s difficult to deny the effects that the *politics (and policy) of informality* – and more specifically of the *DeSotian* experiment of the *condono* – had in the creation and expansion of economic capital among the formerly underprivileged groups involved in it, it is also difficult to ignore its own limits in the creation of sufficient levels of “urban-based” social and cultural capital among the same groups. The persistent condition of multidimensional urban deprivation suffered by *borgate* is a sign that those localized social capital networks that, especially in neo-liberal accounts, are often associated to the raise of individual property and more specifically to homeownership have only partially - if not at all - developed (Coppola, 2008).

This is particularly relevant given the choice that the city administration has made of mobilizing homeowners as the key constituency in the implementation of urban regeneration initiatives. A choice that, building on the foundations of the *condono*, is at the origin of a governance device that seems to be a distinctive case - at least on a theoretical ground - of *neoliberal* urbanism. Many among the characteristics of the *consorzi* recall in fact a neoliberal “policy morphology”: they are based on a “propertarian” conceptualization of citizenship that leads to the creation of a local policy that is explicitly based on ownership (Balibar, 2012); they activate a process of governance rescaling associated to the goals of “responsibilizing” citizens through their mobilization in the provision of formerly government-planned urban services (Brenner, 2005) and they operate the restructuring public action through a strategic use of contractual forms (Perulli, 2010).

At the same time, what can be deemed as a conscious neoliberal project is more probably the outcome of long standing internal evolutions in the highly localized context of the *politics (and policy) of informality* that, since 1950s, has been the locus of intense conflicts and experimentations, both in theoretical and concrete terms, in the field of *urban citizenship*. After initial attempts to mobilize the *politics (and policy) of informality* in order to challenge the role that the access to urban rent has played in the actual definition of urban citizenship, the *DeSotian* experiment of the *condono* and its successive policy evolution have represented a decisive reaffirma-

tion of the inherited pattern. Under the surface of policy innovations that seem to connect the Roman context to the global policy mobilities in the field of urbanism, lays the long-term vitality and adaptability of a local political system that sees in the creation and distribution of the urban rent the key stake for the building of political consensus: what, in the Roman case, could look like *neo-liberalism*, is instead *vetero-liberalism*.

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