URBAN POLITICS AND THE URBANISATION PROCESS:  
A CASE STUDY IN PALERMO

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I

One of the characteristics of urban settlement is the importance of the external and internal economies pertaining to the activities taking place in the settlement. The importance of the internal economies, especially that of the economy of scale, results in the vast extension, both vertical and horizontal, of the unit of the built-up space; while the importance of external economies results in the concentration of urban activities. These phenomena and processes require the intervention of power in one form or another; in modern society, this power is embodied in the public authorities, such as the central and local governments which decree what shape the urban form is to take. This is done by means of town planning, in order to facilitate the supply of public facilities and services, which in their turn create the external economies that are subsequently internalized by private activities. It is here that the conjunction occurs of urban politics and the urbanization process or, in other words, the conjunction of the urban political process and the development of urban form.

Urban form is, in great part, the reification of the past accumulation of the social surplus, a process which greatly differs from city to city or from region to region according to the historical circumstances involved. The political process, which at the same time influences and is influenced by the mode of reproduction of society itself, also differs greatly from period to period and from place to place. In order to analyze the formation process of urban planning and the realization of the planning, it is necessary to specify the historical circumstances and the socio-geographical setting of the city concerned. In this case study of Palermo, therefore, we first consider the city in the context of southern Italian society,\(^1\) which constituted and still now

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constitutes one of two Italys (sometimes argued as one of three Italys, that is, the North, the Centre and the South). Secondly, we turn our attention to Palermitan society, which is analyzed here in the broader cultural context of this city.

II

Many studies have already been carried out on the development of the urban form in Palermo, in relation with the history of the town planning for this city and the realization of this particular urban form (for instance, in De Seta, Di Mauro and Inzerillo). But for our present purpose, which consists of the consideration of existing problems, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the historical centre (centro storico) of this town was fundamentally structured during the sixteenth century, under Spanish domination, as a fortified town surrounded by walls; the street network of this time was practically unchanged from the one preceding it and which had been formed under Islamic domination, and was labyrinthian in character. In the seventeenth century, two axes were to be found cutting through this historical centre; one was an east-west axis running from the old harbour to Porta Nuova, and the other a north-south axis comprising Maqueda Street. It was at this time that the nobility and the wealthy began to move north from their apartments in the centro storico to live in mansions and palazzos. Thus the former vertical segregation of living quarters, wherein the lower class people had lived on the lower floors of a building and the upper class residents on the upper floors, gave way to horizontal form of segregation. In the nineteenth century, the construction of Liberta Street, a northward extension of Maqueda Street, was commenced, and the subsequently formed northern quarter looking onto Liberta Street was transformed into an upper class residential quarter. Thus, in Palermo, a tradition has existed for some time, according to which the upper classes consistently abandoned the centrally located, relatively old quarters to live in the residential quarters now reserved for the rich (quartiere signorile).

The formation of the master plan for the city and the urbanization


5 To some extent, we can observe the same pattern of historical urban development in other southern Italian metropolises such as Naples, which forms a remarkable contrast to the cases of central and northern Italian cities.
process based on this master plan after World War II, in relation with the political processes under the leadership of the Christian Democratic Party, especially of the ‘Young Turks’ or the fanfaniani is precisely analyzed by Judith Chubb. In 1950, when discussions commenced on the master plan for Palermo, the city had a population of 500,000 of which 126,000 lived in the historical center. The master plan adopted by the city council of Palermo in 1959 and approved by the regional assembly of Sicily in 1962 incorporated the fundamental ideas which had been applied to the competition for the creation of a master plan for Palermo held in 1939. Due to the fact that Italy entered the world war that year, it was not possible to select the winner of the competition, but the basic principle involved was the continuation of the northern extension of the built-up area that had been initiated in the nineteenth century and the addition of the westward extension of the built-up area. This westward extension of the city was a natural development, if we consider the close connection of Palermo with Monreale and the existence of trunk routes connecting a large number of prosperous agricultural villages, located in the Conca d’Oro in the hinterland of Palermo, to Palermo. In 1944, the city authorities entrusted four former entrants in the competition of 1939 with the formulation of the construction and further urbanization planning for Palermo, resulting in the master plan eventually adopted in 1959. At first glance the finished plan appeared to be based on a rational perspective of the city development which took into account the historical background of the urban development of Palermo. But a closer examination of the plan in relation to the situation of urbanization in Palermo in the 1950s, and the urbanization processes that followed upon the adoption of the plan up to the 1980s, reveals numerous problems; some of these are peculiar to Palermo alone, while others are common to a large number of southern metropolises in general.

If we look at the schematized map pertaining to the master plan under discussion, one of the first things we notice is that the plan presupposed the

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8 The Northward development of the new residential quarters was already under way in the eighteenth century with the construction of villas owned by the wealthy Palermitans amidst the orchard areas to the north of Palermo and became a fact in the 1920s when the northern extension of two N-S axes (Maqueda and Roma) was determined.
9 The idea of the westward extension of Palermo must have been existed since the establishment of Porta Nuova in the first half of the sixteenth century.
11 In the case of Palermo, the municipal demarcation marks an area comprising actual metropolitan area which, due mainly to the physical conditions, is confined to the Conca d’Oro. This schematized map is taken from “Piano Regolatore Generale” of 1959, and is on a scale of 1:10,000. Various categories of land use such as industrial zones, are omitted. Most of the blank parts are agricultural and/or green zones.
availability of a greatly extended area for residential quarters, the dimensions of which were entirely out of proportion to the pace of urban expansion, being much larger than the existing urbanized area at the end of the 1950s. Secondly, we note the very limited acreage apportioned to the industrial zone located in the south, adjacent to the existing urban area and along a projected road that was to gird the western part of the metropolis (Tangenziale). This indicates that, in the 1950s, when the Italian government seriously set about realizing its grandiose development plans for southern Italy (Mezzogiorno), including its industrialization, Palermo, in its capacity of capital of Sicily, was not expecting its future development as an industrial city. Thirdly, most

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12 Tangenziale has been proposed as a by-pass road to serve the main traffic along the northern coast of Sicily. Actually this road also serves the Palermians where intercity traffic is concerned and is very congested.

13 1950 is generally considered as the year of the beginning of the governmental intervention in the development of southern Italy, with the establishment of Cassa per il Mezzogiorno.
of the Conca d'Oro, which with its prosperous citrus orchards was the most productive agricultural area of Sicily, was designated as a 'green' agricultural zone (zona verde-agricola). In this green zone, however, the construction of buildings having ratios of up to 0.2 m$^3$ per 1 m$^2$, which ratios would enable the construction of villa-type housing, was permitted; only in the 1980s were stricter rules imposed, with the reduction of the ratios to up to 0.025 m$^3$ per 1 m$^2$.

The first notable public works realized according to the master plan were three big housing estates constructed for low income families, the Borgo Nuovo, CEP (Centro di Edilizia Programmata) and ZEN (Zona Espansione Nord). The work of constructing them commenced in the second half of the 1950s and ended in the first half of the 1960s. As will be seen on the map, these three housing estates are located at the extreme north and extreme west of the projected urban area of the city. The realization of these public housing estates required the building of a vast infrastructure, notably the trunk road connecting the estates to the existing urban area. This process has actually facilitated real estate expansion, at the hands of private developers, in the intermediate area between the above-mentioned housing estates, located as they are in peripheral locations and existing built-up areas. These intermediate areas correspond to the direction of the traditional northward extension of the upper class residential quarters, and to the new northwestward extension of newly formed middle and upper middle class residential quarters and have thus become subject to fierce real estate speculation.

The designs for the housing estates were created by famous architectural companies, some of which were established in northern Italy, and were excellent insofar as they were projects for modern satellite towns with numerous social facilities. But the city authorities and housing corporations responsible for constructions for the low-income population (casa popolare) only partially realized the original designs in providing housing that lacked social facilities, even school buildings, thus resulting a sort of new slums or new ghettos. When any one housing project was completed, therefore, people came to live there either as illegal occupants (abusivi), or through patron-clientele relationships with people of influence; generally, though, their right to occupancy was ratified ex post facto. Most of the occupants were and are petty employees and unskilled workers who formerly lived in the historical centre. The earthquake of 1968, which rendered many buildings of the historical centre too

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14 Borgo Nuovo was constructed in 1956-66 and has approximately 25,000 inhabitants. CEP was completed in 1967 and has approximately 12,000 inhabitants. ZEN was completed in 1968-71 and has approximately 13,000 inhabitants.

15 These newly developed residential quarters for people with high-incomes are represented by Via Strassbourg, a northern extension of the Via Libertà quarter.

16 The conditions in Borgo Nuovo and CEP have undergone some amelioration over the past several years, but the conditions in ZEN are still poor.

17 An important condition for ex post facto ratification is the upper limit of income levels.
dangerous to live in, accelerated the exodus from the historical centre of the former inhabitants. Palermo actually has a population of 715,000 of which only 31,000 live in the historical centre; this means that the population in the centre decreased to less than one quarter in thirty years.\textsuperscript{18} Most of the current inhabitants in the historical centre are new arrivals from rural areas or immigrants from foreign countries (Somalians, Libyans and so on). Between the low income housing estates and the old built-up areas, residential areas for upper and middle class members of the population have sprung up. Almost all the designated green agricultural area except for the southern extreme of the municipal area\textsuperscript{19} has been filled up with villa-type housing which was constructed in conformity with the legal norm. Almost nothing has been done, however, for the historical centre which is rich in historical and cultural monuments. We are able to observe that the traditional Palermitan mechanism involving housing filtering, in which older quarters are always inhabited by people having relatively lower incomes while the wealthy form new residential quarters for people having high incomes, has worked perfectly on a larger spatial scale in the past few decades, due to deliberately selective public investment. In order to understand why this mechanism has worked so perfectly, it is necessary to analyze the social and political structure of the city.

III

Ever since the discussions on the problems of Southern Italy (\textit{Questione meridionale}) first took place in the last decades of the nineteenth century,\textsuperscript{20} many characteristics of south Italian cities which considerably differ from the cities of north and central Italy, have been pointed out. For instance, the lack of the tradition of the historical commune, economic parasiticism in the modern period, shortage of illuminist reform in the history of town planning and so on, are some examples. After World War II, the rapid urbanization of south Italian cities has awakened a new interest in research into such matters as housing problems,\textsuperscript{21} rural-urban relationships or the urban network,\textsuperscript{22} town

\textsuperscript{18} Trombino, G.: \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{19} These remaining green areas are found in Roccella, Brancaccio and the Ciaculli-Croce Verde districts; they are not, however, entirely untouched by real estate speculation. (Chubb, J.: \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 203-210.)
planning, the urban political process, and so on. There is no doubt that one of the salient aspects of these approaches towards an understanding of the characteristics of south Italian cities is that of the so-called phenomena of the mafia.

In this case, the term 'mafia' is not limited, at least since the 1960s, to the traditional secret societies of the northwestern part of Sicily, but is understood more broadly as a term for illegal organizations based on the patron-clientele relationship, which in its turn practised all kinds of parasitic activities. In post-industrial society, with the advancement of tertialization, an increasing proportion of the so-called 'underground' sector is generally observable, but the activities exercised by the mafia-type organizations differ from the underground sector of post-industrial society in general in that they also embody the illegal sphere and that they resort, if necessary, to violence. Tertialization is also remarkable in the economy of the southern Italian cities but in southern Italy, where industrialization has been extremely limited, having an insufficient spread effect, as the term 'the cathedral in the desert' indicates, there is nothing to be discussed with regard to post-industrial society in the strict sense. In this context, tertialization in southern Italian cities is somewhat similar to the phenomena of urban involution of C. Geertz or the juxtaposition of

26 Since the second half of the 1970s this expression used with ironical intent to express a huge capital intensive industrial location having little multiplier effect.
formal and informal sectors in Third World cities; but in the economy of southern Italy, ‘informal’ only stands for the ‘hidden’ or the ‘illegal’, and there is no separation of the distribution circuit between formal and informal sectors, as seen in the economy of Third World cities, caused by the vast differences in income levels.

Mafia-type organizations, however, make the ‘informal’ a large part of the urban economy of the south Italian cities and, at the same time, the patron-client relationships characteristic of their style of operating also penetrate into public administrations, local governments, semi-governmental organizations and even the state apparatus itself. Thus the exercise of power by mafia-type organizations are based not only on private violence but can, on occasion, have recourse to the power of the state. In this way, we can very often observe an urban process backed by violence, such as the illegal occupation of public land and public housing and the illegal construction of buildings (though the latter case is somewhat rare in the instance of Palermo due to the existence of innumerable loopholes in the regulations that, as mentioned before, make it possible to circumvent the regulations) which are ratified ex post facto with a minimum of trouble.

The presently existing mafia-type organizations are sometimes referred to as the new or entrepreneurial mafia. A new phenomenon in counter to massive public intervention in the Mezzogiorno problem, they no longer represent the symptoms of the socio-economic backwardness of the south; the poverty-stricken, almost deserted interior countryside of the south, which constituted the scene of the traditional mafia, is no longer the focus of the activities of current actual mafia-type organizations. Instead, their activities are developed in the most prosperous areas of the Mezzogiorno, particularly in the cities and sometimes to the north and beyond in various parts of the world. At the same time, they continue to maintain certain characteristics of

31 In Sicily we can very often see the skeletons of buildings abandoned halfway through the work of construction, and which are, in fact, awaiting post hoc legitimization subsequent to the abusive commencement of the construction.
33 The discussion is contained in Dalla Chiesa et al.: op. cit., 1985.
34 Also, in the reports of the Parliamentary Commission, the term fenomeno della mafia is not restricted to the traditional mafia, comprising as it does all the activities of mafia-type organizations.
the traditional mafia of the days of their grandfathers (mafia di nonno) as pointed out by Ferrarotti; these characteristics include the importance of the patron-client relationship in the mechanism of resource allocation, the persistence of violence as the ultimate recourse, and the aspects of closeness and non-transparency. In this sense, the mafia as a social organization is simply a phenomenon; yet it represents, first of all, a certain behaviour pattern, a value system or culture. In illustration of this fact, only less than 10 percent of the inhabitants of the casa popolare of Palermo took up residence there by means of official routes, that is, by being chosen by lot from a list of registered applicants. The rest of the inhabitants took up residence by means of the exercise of violence, such as forced entry into newly-constructed apartments, or by means of the recommendation of influential people. All this is indicative of the widespread diffusion of the mafia-type mentally among the Palermitan people. As Costis Hadjimichalis points out, in Italy, under the Christian Democratic hegemony, the practice of clientalism resulted in institutionalized tripartite relationships among government agencies, private interests and the party machine. The large number of state agencies and parastate organizations permitted the production and reproduction of a vast patronage network, which has been particularly important in consolidating Christian Democrat rule in the south.

Against this background, we can clearly understand that the decision-making processes of the master plan for Palermo in the 1950s, and the consequent realization process of urbanization in the 1960s under the administration of the mayors Lima, Cincimino and others, were by no means a casual coincidence of the interests of real estate entrepreneurs with the administration of town planning authorities. The elaboration of the master plan and the subsequent accomplishment of public works, such as the three large housing estates for the low income populace had been deliberately engineered in the interests of mafia-type organization which, in that period, shifted one of their main fields of activities from the traditional parasiticism of the distribution system to speculation in construction and real estate. In other words, the above period corresponds to the birth of the entrepreneurial mafia. It is difficult, however, to attest to the structure involving the tie-up of the administration with mafia-type elements by means of written documents. We are able to trace only the behaviour of some elements or personalities which were later judged the judicial authorities to be mafiosi, such as Lima, Cincimino, Greco

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37 Many authors consider the "culture of recommendation" an expression of the patron-clientele relationship.


and others. With regard to the financial resources supporting the activities of the entrepreneurial mafia, we note according to Centorrino the importance of public expenditures made in the name of the development of the Mezzogiorno after 1950. A substantial part of the spread effects of these huge public investments came to be absorbed by the north Italian industries, but there is little doubt that a great part must also have been absorbed by the mafia-type organizations closely connected to public administration. As Arlacchi points out, we must also take note of the fact that the mafia-type organizations have consistently been active in illegal fields such as drug refining and trafficking and in smuggling as well as in legal fields. A large amount of the profits obtained from activities in illegal fields must have been transferred for investment in legal fields through the channels of financial institutions which are certainly under the control of mafia elements. While it is extremely difficult or impossible to directly trace this flow of capital, Cacciola underlined the abnormal increase of bank branches in Sicily after 1963, as an indication of the existence of this kind of financial channel.

The exclusive domination of the Christian Democrats in the Palermo city administration came to an end in 1975, to be replaced by a three-party coalition local government, and subsequently, in 1985, by a five-party city government, and by a new five-party coalition with a changed composition in 1987. For the time being, it is necessary to reserve judgement on the new situation in Palermo regarding urban policies after 1975. But should the situation dominated as it is by mafia-type elements have its roots in the mafia culture, a kind of cultural revolution becomes necessary in order to change the orientation of the urban policies under question. There are a number of instances of other south Italian cities — Naples, for example — which function under a leftwing administration but which at the same time exemplify the fact that corruption evolving from the patron-client type of relationship survives

40 Besides referring to official and newspaper documents, we can also refer to the scientific certain researchers such as Chubb, L.: op. cit., 1982.
44 Regarding the illegal sphere of mafia activities, there is naturally little evidence and documents; but from the juridical records published, such as Stajano, C.: op. cit., 1986, it is possible for us to reconstruct the general features of such activities.
46 In the 1970s, the one-party administration of the Christian Democrats at the local level was already somewhat of an exception to the rule.
47 That is, a coalition of Christian Democrat, Socialist, Social Democrat, Republican and Liberalist Parties, a composition matching that of the central government.
48 In place of the Socialists and Republicans, the Green Party and the “Una città per l'uomo” group, the latter being dissidents of the Catholic political movement, have joined the coalition.
even under a leftwing administration, and is instrumental in bringing the city involved to the verge of bankruptcy.\textsuperscript{49}

On the other hand, however, we cannot ignore the emergency of certain new trends in the form of political movements such as the Città per l'uomo,\textsuperscript{50} the new Catholic political movement outside the Christian Democratic Party or the Green Party. Most of the protagonists of the real estate boom of the 1960s and 70s are now in prison and, given the fact that the Conca d'Oro is now almost entirely filled up by brick and cement, there is at this point little space available in Palermo to real estate investment. The historical centre, centrally located but perpetually left to lie in peripheral conditions, now perhaps constitutes the most important or renewal, including the conservation of historical and cultural monuments and the realization of public facilities such as transport and parking. The regional assembly of Sicily is now immersed in discussions on new measures to make possible the participation of private capital in the work of the renewal of the historical centre. Theoretically, if democratic control were assured, the mobilization of private capital in the interests of the public would be desirable; but in the climate of the culture of the mafia, it could also open up a field to surplus capital for new investments on the part of the mafia, thus internalizing the external economy created by public investment.

On the other hand, as Sgroi points out,\textsuperscript{51} it is also necessary to take into consideration the new paradox whereby clientelism and authoritarianism can no longer act as stabilizing forces in southern Italy; in fact, they themselves are important factors in the process of destabilization. Clientelism and authoritarianism are not simply the means by which the state equips itself to tackle the wider economic and political crisis but are, in themselves, the products of a deep structural crisis which the state itself helps to produce and reproduce.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{49} The result was the absence of a Municipal government, in place of which the central government nominated a provisional administering committee.

\textsuperscript{50} These Catholic militants who are dissidents from the dominant Christian Democrat clearly state the necessity of some sort of cultural revolution, in order to change the moral climate of Southern Italian society.


\textsuperscript{52} Ingroa, P.: Des région pour unir. \textit{Critica Marxista} no. 65, 1976.