

Land use regulation and social regulation: Some reflections on the origins and evolution of sprawl in the Veneto Region

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Objective and discussion

The territories of industrial districts and/or of diffusion of small and medium-sized manufacturing firms and their clustering around some industrial specialization have been deeply studied since the Seventies. In the case of Italy, such situations were typical of North-East and Central regions, and experienced a deep crisis since the Ninety, mainly because of globalization processes. In particular, in the case of Veneto (that will be our case-study), important studies have been developed on two distinct but intertwined subjects:

- a) The evolution and crisis of the economic model and of its peculiar form of social and political regulation;
- b) The raise of a kind of “città diffusa” (dispersed city) as one of the main consequences of this development model. Much less attention has been paid to land use regulation.

Regulation of social and economic systems has been defined in many ways. For our purposes, we adopt the Polanyi’s perspective, as it has been developed in the field of economics and sociology of local development, particularly in Italian foundational contributions to the studies of industrial districts.

The key point is that, even in a system that seems dominated by the market, the market mechanisms are deeply intertwined in local communities, in systems of reciprocity and/or communitarian practices and in redistributive public actions, where the “local state” consistently acts to support and strengthen both social integration and the effectiveness of local economy. This weaving of regulation forms was framed, until the Ninety, in very shared political orientation and normative orientations about the role of family, labor, individual action, etc. Ostensibly, such a situation produced reciprocal trust and strong local networks that facilitates the participation in cooperative market games, as a collective good that can be also defined as “social capital”.

Even if the involvement of public institutions seems weak in such situations, local governments were important providers of collective goods for social integration and reproduction issues (local welfare) and for the local economic performances (infrastructures for development). Such actions are meaningful because of their embeddedness with reciprocity and market mechanism, particularly in the case of housing. From this point of view, the unexplored link between social regulation and land use regulation appears very important in order to understand the “planned sprawl” and the role of land use regulation as constitutive of the success and crisis of the traditional industrial district model.

The disperse urbanization has been usually understood as a mainly spontaneous, bottom-up process, in which local governments adapted their action to the local demands of households and firms, eventually producing a huge sprawl and severe negative externalities that jeopardized the development model itself, neglecting the role of planning and land use regulation as a basic instrument in producing such a situation. Explanations in terms of laissez-faire, bottom-up scarcely regulated processes dominated by a predominant American-like individualistic habit, does not seem satisfactory.

We will use the term “land use regulation” as synonymous of (compulsory) “land use planning” designed and implemented by some local government, particularly through zoning as an instrument of allocation of uses, densities and building rules in different areas. It is normally supposed that land use regulation aims to curb the sprawl and the land/urban rent.

The greater part of the 580 municipalities of Veneto had a compulsory land use plan (*Piano regolatore generale*) at least since the early Seventies. The planning system included also regional

and province spatial plans, and a variety of local and regional spatial planning for specific issues (transportation, mobility, health care facilities, landscape, waste disposal, etc.). Differently from the USA planning, where urban land use plans are often described as the result of interaction processes in complex arenas, in the European and Italian planning, plans, at least until the Eighties, were supposed mainly to be a product of local government through political strategy and planning expertise.

Before 2004, regional and national planning system was based on a hierarchy of plans, in which the most important was the land use plan at the local level, and that included both zoning and regulation and structural design of the territory. The 11/2004 Veneto regional Act significantly changed the planning system (like other Acts enacted by Italian regional governments). A structure plan, fairly similar to the old British one, was introduced for spatial planning at local or inter-municipal level (PAT, *Piano per l'assetto del territorio*) as a frame for the operative local land use plans (PI, *Piano degli interventi*), with novel and specific procedures with regard to traditional ones (participation, public-private partnership, development right transfers, thresholds limits to sprawl, etc.). Ultimately, the regional territory has been intensely planned and regulated, but nevertheless it produced a significant sprawl and settlement dispersion and fragmentation.

Such a situation is normally described as a bad planning, particularly from the point of view of experts. However, such a judgment does not explain the very success of land use regulation in terms of social integration, political consensus-building, and effectiveness with respect to the economic model, at least until, in the Ninety, spatial arrangements began to produce negative externalities and contradictions with regards to new requirements of globalization and pluralization of life-worlds.

Planning implementation for flexibility was mainly founded in two instruments: the *variante* (plan updating), and the over-estimation of requirements in terms of space, unities and volumetric sizes for the various functions (residential, industrial, commercial and so on). Updating of plans is obviously not a bad practice in itself, and it is not peculiar of the Italian case. For instance, the French POS (*plan d'occupation des sols*, i.e. land use plans) has been changed frequently, rapidly and incessantly, according to changes in local political orientation. In the case of Veneto, the use of this mechanism is impressive: during the Eighties and Nineties, were produced 400 planning instruments per year (including new plans and updating).

The updating was normally associated to quite important and sometimes unpredictable new demands, and the result of some kind of negotiation between public and private actors. Inclusion of new and original activities such as commercial facilities (malls, shopping centers, outlet) or leisure facilities (like thematic parks, discos, multiplex cinemas), matching with the timing of planning investments or expectations of real estate developers or industrial entrepreneurs, the satisfaction of a diffuse residential demand are some of the factors that pushed for the intense plan updating.

This practice ensured the greatest flexibility to the system as a whole, and was very consistent with the priority of economic development. Last but not least, more urbanization meant more tax revenues for local government, which could be invested in infrastructures and services. Furthermore, 'inclusive' and catch-all plans raised the political consensus and social integration. Land use regulation through *varianti* was effective in consensus-building and flexibility. On the other hand, plans as an instrument of control lost any credibility.

The instrument of land use regulation, even those reformed by the regional Act 11/2004, seems inadequate, in their practical implementation, to pursue those objectives. The Act was written in a period of growth, and by right-wing parties strongly committed to localistic and old-fashion industrialist cognitive frame. Actually, the Act contains statements against the sprawl, and suggests instruments and technicalities in order to preserve agricultural land from residential and non-residential scattering. At the same time, the Act allows for the increase of new developments from 10 to 30% of the agricultural land. With regards to the plan implantation, we can see that the majority of new plans we have analyzed go ahead with a planned sprawl policy.

As a matter of fact, land use planning seems quite ineffective to cope with the requirement of social integration and economic effectiveness, because of the deep uncertainty about the dynamic,

the dependencies from financial and economic global markets, the wider plurality of life-words and expectations, the decline of family as agent of social cohesion, and the severe lack of public resources to implement plans. Land use regulation seems weaker than in the past, while the role of public institutions in social regulation processes increased during the last twenty years.

The territorial transformation through a variety of urban projects make up of a bricolage of resources and actors, often based on European, national or regional calls for competitive selections, which contribute to change the agency of public institutions. In such projects, in which often the participation and/or public/private partnerships are required by the calls, the key theme is the re-use and the regeneration which are quite independent with regards to the planning system. In such field, the governance as a kind of regulation shows a significant convergence between social regulation and the governance of transformation of the built environment.

Methods and data used

The social and political regulation of the area has been very deeply investigated in the last 30 years. An impressive base of knowledge has been accumulated both at the international and national level. Regarding to such literature, we will highlight and discuss those characters that are most important in order to explore the hypothesis of a strong relationship between land use planning (and regulation) and socio-political regulation and its changes.

Data on land consumption and sprawl are available at many spatial scales. For our aims, the in-depth reports of Ispra (2016) are more than satisficing. As regards the data concerning land use planning and regulation, we have accessed to the original data-bases of the Department of Territorial Planning of the Veneto regional government. In particular, regards to the new planning system introduced with the regional Act 11/2004, we have considered the 30 structure inter-municipal plans (PATI) adopted and approved by the regional government until 2014, located in all provinces and involving 103 communes out of 580.

Our methodology is quite simple: we have identified the most relevant socio-economic characters and their transformation, particularly those most influent on the spatial structuration; we will discuss how and why ordinary practices of land use planning and regulation at the local government level has been constitutive of the development model, arguing for a strong intentionality of the local governments (against the still influential hypotheses of mainly spontaneous processes); we will discuss how and why land use planning does not yet keep pace with the radical changes in economy and society and in the associated changes in social and political regulation.

Results and conclusions

Main conclusions are the following:

- 1) in the golden age of development, differently from current interpretation about laissez-fair in regulation and/or widespread individualistic habits, regulation by the local governments was impressive and intense, much more than in other fields such as the labor market;
- 2) in such a phase, a very effective embeddedness of public planning in local cultures and social and economic practices was evident. Particularly, the generation of sprawl, in a historical situation of a dense network of medium and small cities and villages, can be interpreted also as a product of an effective mix of reciprocity, market and authority. The sprawl, far from be a spontaneous phenomenon, appears as the product of an intentional strategy supported by a diffuse social and cognitive frame where the industrial and housing development was intended as the greatest public issue;
- 3) the planning mechanisms for regulation in order to achieve the maximum degree of flexibility in processes of homeownership family housing and industrial buildings has been an incessant and intense activity of plan updating and large overestimation of housing, industry and commercial spaces requirements. Planning justification for such practices combine two discourses, one on the

priority of industrial and housing development and the other on polycentrism at any scale as objective of political and economic equilibrium;

- 4) the homogeneity of social formation became to decline since the Eighties, associate to significant changes in families, population, economic bases, pluralization of life-worlds, rising of environmental conflicts. Regional planning system was reformed in 2004, but, until now, it does not seem capable to cope with new requirements, and the implementation shows the persistence of traditional practices. As a matter of fact, the more significant urban and spatial transformations take place through often contingent urban projects and governance styles.