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**THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE
URBAN VITALITY VERSUS INDUSTRIAL DECAY: THE
GREAT NORTH EXPERIENCE**

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THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE

URBAN VITALITY VERSUS INDUSTRIAL DECAY: THE GREAT NORTH EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The paper deals with the effects of postindustrial decay in two European cities: Newcastle upon Tyne in Britain and Taranto in Italy. After a description of the crisis in the two contexts and of the policies adopted, a discussion is provided on a factor which the paper indicates plays a key part in the substantial success of some redevelopment policies in Britain.

This key factor is the active role played by citizens, their effort to use all energies, initiatives, a continuous dynamism to help their city to overcome the present deep crisis. The importance of the *human factor* as a strong redevelopment issue has been well understood by many British policies, in their emphasis on the enhancement of *town spirit*. This is intended to be an important lesson for such decaying areas as Taranto.

The first part of the paper is an overview of the social and economic situation in the above-mentioned cities, with some facts and figures and information on policies used to counterbalance the crisis. The last part provides a discussion of the importance of endogenous resources for socioeconomic aims, analyzing the outcomes in the context of the international literature and the effectiveness of some successful policies. Here an emphasis is put on *town spirit* as a catalyst of the redevelopment of decaying postindustrial countries.

Environment and Economy

This commentary is the product of my experience as a resident of a steelmaking and engineering manufacturing city in the economic periphery of Italy, the town of Taranto in the region of Apulia, who came on a visit to Newcastle, another city based on engineering and coal mining, in the economic periphery of England (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Newcastle and Taranto on the European Periphery

In September 1989, when I first set foot in Newcastle Upon Tyne, I felt the sensation that the atmosphere round me was very cold, detached, fundamentally different from the Mediterranean one. This coldness was both a climatic and a cultural phenomenon. But I was not embittered or disappointed. On the contrary, I felt fascinated, excited by a new reality, caught up in a coldness of behaviour, of culture, which seems somehow considered to be at the heart of the fortunes of urban planning and of the fortunes of the economy in Great Britain.

The reason for coming to a town about 3000 kilometres from Taranto, my home town, was linked up with the compilation of a thesis on the application of the criteria for the Environmental Impact Assessment in a land afflicted with post-industrial crisis. It was intended to parallel an analogous piece of research carried out in Taranto, a town also in a deep crisis, owing to the decline of steel industry. My hypothesis was that, in a more developed economic and political context such as Britain, more thought would have been given to the environmental dimensions of development, with a more sophisticated practice of Environmental Impact Assessment resulting.

This would, I surmised, have a significant benefit for economic development, because some recent Italian studies (see Consiglio and Lacava 1987, Remeo 1989, Italimpianti 1987, PCI 1989) suggested that the decay of the urban environment, of industrial estates, and the rural environment had produced more waste of resources than increase of industrial/economic benefits.

Table 1: The City of Newcastle and the Province of Taranto

| | Newcastle | Taranto |
|--------------|-----------|------------|
| AREA (sq km) | | |
| Region | 400 | 2,437 |
| District | 130 | 310 |
| RESIDENTS | | |
| Region | 841.000* | 572.314*** |
| District | 282.000** | 244.101*** |
| POP. DENSITY | 1985 | 1981 |
| Region | 2.103 | 235 |
| District | 2.169 | 787 |

Sources: Italian Census of population 1981

Robinson ed 1989 p.4, Robinson et al ed 1985, p.1

* Newcastle Metropolitan Region 1981 ** Newcastle City Council 1985 ***1981

Very soon I realized some evidence which sensibly - but substantially and for the better - changed the object of my attention. Firstly, British studies and experience with Environmental Impact Assessment were relatively few at the time, too few to be the argument for a thesis. But I was

puzzled as to why these were so few, for a country with so advanced an environment, both academic and economic, as Great Britain.

Britain certainly has a long tradition of project evaluation. It is historically acknowledged that the simple Cost-Benefit Analysis (C.B.A.) has been well-developed in Anglo-Saxon counties, where it has been successfully applied in the economic and often also in the social field, in spite of the well-known risk that the evaluation of activities inconvertible into cash entails. In the philosophy of Environmental Impact Assessment that risk, even if not overcome, is amortized by appraising impacts on 'difficult' subjects (environment, territory, community), so evaluation analysis is given a more scientific nature and greater credit. It is clear that the necessity of this type of analysis - which however is only a means to provide advice and support for the decision itself - becomes less significant if the person who carries out the analysis, the institution that makes the decision, the community that receives the impact, already possesses an ingrained and well-developed set of values. In this case, impacts are automatically considered, implicitly and explicitly, in the decision process.

On the other hand, some communities, maybe owing to historical questions of poverty, or the lack of a democratic tradition, possess a less articulated common heritage of values, with less emphasis on the environment. For example, in Southern Italy, value considerations are characterized by the defence of few points among which environment, for example, does not appear. In this context, Environmental Impact Assessment can be of much greater importance in *promoting* new values.

I therefore concluded that Environmental Impact Assessment was not of great significance in the British context in promoting consideration of the contribution of environmental quality to economic development, as these issues were already being considered. What I found instead was that the preoccupation of policy agencies in these regions was with *economic development*.

So I made a definitive shift in my studies and after a few days I started to probe into the detail of policies focused on realising the economic potential of regions, profiting by the objective situation of Newcastle upon Tyne. In fact, over the years, the North of England, the Great North - to use its marketing slogan - has been the soil for experimenting with a very remarkable number of policies aimed at stimulating development.

People say «You've carried coals to Newcastle» on receiving as a innovation something with which they are already familiar. Since 1994, there are no coal mines still working in the area. Shipbuilding too is almost at a standstill. Perhaps the socio-economic recovery policies, which have changed the aspect of this former "Capital of Coal", may represent a landmark in policy which could become an essential element of the policies of other towns - such as Taranto - facing industrial decline.

Taranto has some similarities to Newcastle upon Tyne, in particular the vicissitudes, both economic (being linked to the manufacturing economic base) and demographic (having the same population of 250,000 resident inhabitants in their cities).

Table 2: Employment in Tyneside and Taranto

| |
|------------------------------|
| Employment in Tyneside, 1981 |
| Total Employment |

| Sector | 1981 | |
|---------------|---------|------|
| | Numbers | % |
| Primary | 6,714 | 2% |
| Manufacturing | 101,106 | 29% |
| Construction | 21,824 | 6% |
| Services | 224,774 | 63% |
| Total | 354,418 | 100% |

| |
|--|
| Employment in Provincia di Taranto, 1981 |
| Total Employment |

| Sector | 1981 | |
|---------------|---------|------|
| | Numbers | % |
| Primary | 1,341 | 1% |
| Manufacturing | 48,365 | 38% |
| Construction | 7,162 | 6% |
| Services | 69,515 | 55% |
| Total | 126,383 | 100% |

Taranto's economy, which was once agricultural, has undergone a transformation since 1961, when a metallurgic industry was built: Italsider, a public big branch plant reached the figure of around 30,000 workers. After the Yom Kippur war (1973) and the related oil crisis, the international steel industry has been in a constant decline. This has had particularly serious consequences in those industrial monocultural contexts of which Taranto is a clear example.

Today the crisis of the Taranto area, which started in the industrial sector, is spreading widely throughout the economy and affecting the living conditions of the inhabitants. During the 1950s, in order both to encourage locations for industries far from the congestion of the North, and to create the conditions for an economic growth in the South, the law "Provedimenti per il Mezzogiorno" was issued. This aimed at obtaining a self-propelling economic dynamic. Starting from the industrialization of certain areas, considered as "Development Poles", this external intervention was intended to trigger off a wide-ranging development process in the Mezzogiorno. But, especially due to the credit policies, it was heavy industries that benefited from the policy for the South, to the detriment of the small and medium-sized enterprises and of the other sectors of the economy, which obtained completely insufficient investments. This disproportion (coupled with the territorial imbalance created by the new activities) has hindered the spread of an industrial and entrepreneurial capacity, clearly in contrast with the spirit of the Development Pole

policy itself. In the end we can say that the self-propelling spirit of the developing pole has been hindered by the very public industry that was to stimulate it - a real paradox.

The Taranto area has been deeply affected by the difficulties and contradictions of that policy. The town now is both a typical case of industrial decadence and an atypical case, because there were no prior local industrial traditions. If on the one hand the adventure of the Industrial Pole heralding development may be considered a dramatically decayed experiment, on the other hand, there is no sign of either national/regional policies aimed generally at economic development, nor are these strategies coming from the local authorities either. And in such a tormented moment as this in Italian social and economic life, people's interest seems to be moving away from the problems of the region in which they live. This neglect seems to enhance the constant agony of Taranto area.

The examples of successful policies, the possibility of applying some policy measures to counterbalance that crisis became my goal in visiting Newcastle, as I knew that the territorial policies tried there, and the research carried out there, had aroused international interest. To the analysis of these policies I devoted six months' study, afterwards reported in some debates and publications in Italy. (Camarda 1990, Borri and Camarda 1990, Camarda 1991).

Yet this analysis of successful measures, however variegated and articulated, could not explain the key motor of the success - at times total, at times partial - of a whole series of measures to promote development in the Newcastle area. It was important to identify that motive, so as to hope to encapsulate the experiences of the Great North in order to understand what the practical application of such an approach would involve in the reality of a poor postindustrial city in the South of Italy. Last year I came back to the same town, and I soon realized that I had failed to examine closely a determining characteristic, namely the knowledge of the places, the people, their customs, their attitude to the common good and to their governments. I understood that the culture of a place, its *town spirit*, appeared to be of primary importance in understanding the economic development policies. This spirit was a real catalyst for socioeconomic development. So I set about analysing the causes and effects of the strong spirit of Tyneside, a hidden but determining element, which has helped to give an effectiveness to the territorial policies of that corner of Europe.

THE SPIRIT OF THE TYNE

A traveller happening to spend his time in the streets of Newcastle Upon Tyne, the county town of Tyne and Wear, will at once notice the people incessantly swarming about from morning to night and filling the air with a persistent noise of voices, which is rather unusual in the cold North of Europe. They are all people busy with shopping, looking for something, asking about; strolling students from the famous local Universities, cyclists, skateboarders, yuppies, workers from the small town yards, local hawkers (see Figure 2)

Certainly it was not the same years ago, when the great industrial base started dismissing the first large groups of workers, leaving their families with an indecipherable future. The City Centre itself has always been a lively place - the picture of busy people has been hardly reported (see Robinson 1985, pp 200).

From 1961 to 1981, manufacturing employment in the Newcastle metropolitan area fell from 250,000 to 150,000 employees, with a record drop of about 40%. From 1971 to 1981, manufacturing employment in Tyneside fell from 175,000 to 100,000 employees, a strong fall of

about 45%, mitigated overall to 20% only by the uneven performance of the service sector (see Robinson 1985, pp 18). It was not a peculiar aspect of Tyneside, since Wearside and Derwentside showed a similar pattern. (Robinson et al. 1985, Robinson & Sadler 1984, Hughes 1990, Clay 1989).

Some years ago, skimming a Sunderland daily, one could read:

«Columns of figures cannot replace real living working men and women, their children and families, and the way they live». (Sunderland Echo, 1988).

They were years in which the shipyards and steelworks shut down and there were strikes and demonstrations, and a deep dejection wafted along the streets (see Robinson 1985, p 213). Today Newcastle, though having problems, appears as a dynamic town, with an energetic City government, and other dynamic public agencies, always ready to carry out commissions and bring some business to an end.

If we have a look at the occupational panorama in Tyne and Wear, we can see that long term unemployment amounts to about 50% of total unemployed (Northern Development Company, 1992). This figure is high, but lower than some figures of other European regions experiencing industrial decline (see Lever 1993). If half the active population enjoys periods of employment - even in a small entrepreneurial structure, unstable and closure-prone - it is not difficult to foresee a turn-over which could be beneficial to the economy and certainly important for the mood of the community, as is well evidenced by American case-studies (see Blakely 1989, pp 189-199, Robinson & Sadler 1984). In these studies, one of the key ingredients for economic recovery appears to be the active and positive attitude of the community, whose function becomes a productive component.

Figure 2: City Centre Ambience: Newcastle and Taranto

Newcastle

Taranto

In fact, the circumstances in which the community are made more aware of their future and feel involved in the necessary economic strategies are claimed to stimulate the people's sensibility and creativity, resulting in a promotional behaviour rather than a destructive one, facilitating the promotion of operations having common interests. For example, such policies as Workshop Enterprises, Self Employment Schemes, Community Business - carried out both in USA and in Britain. Even if these do not have a big numerical impact on jobs, they contribute to enhancing the entrepreneurial spirit of the community and to preparing the best ground for administrators to launch policies for development (Blakely 1989; Law 1992; Malizia 1986).

In the present case, the many projects started by Tyne and Wear Development Corporation were deliberately intended gradually to improve the integration of interventions in the physico-social tissue, the real concern of all policies. In the latest projects, such as Newcastle Quayside, even if they have planned an impressive intervention (a concentration of about 35,000 square metres of new offices, 215 new houses, 150 new hotel rooms on 10 hectares of reclaimed land), TWDC have diluted the phases in the course of time, so as to avoid the sudden emptying of the City Centre and the consequent socioeconomic imbalance (TWDC 1993b). The gradualness of the operations will be probably the real winning card of the project.

The promotion of specific economic development projects was accompanied by a carefully articulated publicity campaign, a sophisticated exercise in urban marketing. This was itself carried out through agreement with the various public agencies involved - the City Council, the Tyne and Wear Development Corporation, and the regional economic promotion agency, the Northern Development Company (Wilkinson 1992). This campaign is an emblematic sign of social penetration: still today, after some works have been finished or nearly so, they publicize and exalt what has been done, which quickens the entrepreneurial spirit of the community. Among the operations encouraged by local authorities, is the re-launch and promotion of the Newcastle United Football Club into the soccer First Division, an event which further develops civic pride and gives citizens a more diffuse sense of confidence in the present situation.¹

The Newcastle community can also rely on a robust promotional activity within the research sector, stimulated by a demand for technological and relational innovation from the firms for the improvement of productivity. Local administrations, by favouring such collaborations, will more and more widely show that they have already acquired the concept of complementarity between development and research, in this way following the tendencies expressed by the most recent macroeconomic analyses (Northern Development Company 1992, Robinson 1989).

Besides the famous *red-brick University*, the traditional answer to the Colleges of the South, the other existing Universities appear to be well linked up with local entrepreneurs, as to both students and teachers². Several internationally known academics are also involved in local affairs, for example, Professor John Goddard on the Board of the Port of Tyne Authority, and Professor Patsy Healey on the Board of the Tyne and Wear Development Corporation. This type of

¹ The case of a soccer team is not anyway a standard for the welfare of a community, as is sometimes believed; if so, it would mean that Napoli, having a team in the First Division, is a well-off town, which is notoriously untrue.

² Newcastle Polytechnic, now Northumbria University, as well as other Universities of the neighbourhood. In 1986 full-time students in Newcastle were about 20,000. See Robinson, F. et al. 1989. This number has since increased substantially.

interchange on the one hand positively helps the research-economy confrontation, and on the other shows the precise academic will to affect the local socioeconomic tissue, a rather infrequent tendency in the European panorama, especially in Southern Europe ³.

Apart from these positive encouraging elements, however, the objective reality is not to be forgotten: nearly 68,000 people are unemployed in the area (7% of the population), of whom 20,000 are in Newcastle (about 8%) (T.W.D.C. 1993a). Though in six years about 10,000 jobs have been created, they are clearly insufficient, and do not replace the jobs which continue to be lost. Often they are not fulltime jobs, and some of the new firms may not stay long in the area (Mason 1986).

A comparison with other European cities shows Newcastle well below average, equalling, according to some classifications (DATAR 1989), towns diametrically opposed in terms of position with respect to Europe's dynamic *blue banana* (Hall 1992), the economic heart of Europe. In any case, the social and economic reality which lies behind such figures is not always easy to read in such data. Let us take Taranto, for example, which has the same percentage of unemployment (9%), even if it presents a far worse socioeconomic and cultural picture, the consequence of a disastrous management of Italian industrial policy ⁴.

So, the situation is anything but rosy in Newcastle. But then everywhere in Europe is currently experiencing problems.(Lever 1993). But what is evident in Newcastle is the mobility and liveliness of the people, apparently aware that they are on the only way to go and it implies a *continuous dynamism*, a constant effort to improve the city's economic position.

Certainly not all research literature agrees with this "bottom up" way of promoting the future of a community, and calls for a return of government support for a sort of *fin de siècle* welfare state, as the only strategy able to guarantee a really harmonious development (Clark 1993). Especially in the present situation of advanced recession, financial benefits and social choices subsidized by the State are starting to be discussed again, as measures with which to try and stop an unemployment rate which in Europe has risen from 4% in the early seventies up to today's 12%, i.e. a full 8 percentage points (Modolo 1993).

Even if we agree upon the necessity of a more concrete intervention of the State in the arena of economic development policy, it is helpful to emphasize the following point. Leaving out of consideration whether or not the development policies adopted in Great Britain have been sufficiently comprehensive, and whether they have been totally or partially efficacious, the initial debate has been replaced by a decided action, dictated by clear guide-lines, and its benefit, at times very small, has been visible at once. And people have welcomed this proposition, adopting, even if critically, a constructive attitude. This has enabled and enables policies to be carefully monitored and possibly improved.

In many Southern European contexts, instead, the demand for development policies grows in proportion to the incompetence of local political actors who make choices of the reactive type

³ The case is not infrequent in England: Durham University, for instance, took part in the socioeconomic recovery plan for Shildon (Shildon Action Plan, 1984), and Sunderland University is an active partner of T.W.D.C. for the reclamation of St. Peter's Riverside.

⁴ See Borri, D. & D. Camarda (1990). In 1992 crisis caused the ratio of closed to new enterprises in Taranto to be as high as 120%.

(Camarda 1990), often disregarding strategic projects for actions which are more convenient in the short term. This is still the case in Taranto, where from 1974 to 1991 no fewer than 16 studies on socioeconomic/environmental recovery were proposed: only three of them have become operative and have produced no visible results as regards economic recovery.

A LESSON FOR DEVELOPMENT: THE HUMAN FACTOR

In the winter of 1986, for the first time in the local history, Taranto sports complex played host to a concert of an international rock group, *The Talking Heads*. The show attracted few mass-media, few fans, many occasional listeners, but such an atmosphere was created as to make the concert particularly agreeable. The organizers were enthusiastic, and the listeners were happy too, and so were *The Talking Heads*, pleased to discover an unexpected and participative audience. After that winter, other international groups have followed and each of them has been welcomed in the same way and has felt the same positive atmosphere, which led to the success of an operation that, all in all, had been started with considerable doubt and strong opposition.

What does this tale imply? Certainly, the conditions of Taranto's entertainment sector, as drowned as it is in collective decay and economic stagnation, has not received much appreciable benefit. Nevertheless this little event has generated an unexpected positive attitude by the people towards their local authority and has attracted other rock groups, starting a socioeconomic virtuous circle, very small but effective.

Today, owing to the postindustrial crisis, to the prevailing international recession and to the increasing scale of automation, it becomes more and more difficult to create numerous lasting jobs, which means that the amount of average unemployment will grow several percentage points. This has been predicted for some time (Turani 1993). It is not difficult to point out the unpopularity of policies which, somehow, have to face this *status quo*: but at present, this ground is considered essential to prime development hypotheses, first of all censuring the gap between citizens and political management, the distance between people and the 'palace', and then also involving the community in discussing the meaning and the targets that local administrators and managers should reach.

In the light of this point, the distance separating Italian communities from their governments is a real handicap for development, and even policies of some importance progressively lose the effectiveness which they seem to have at the start. Often in the past, the management of public affairs in many areas of Italy seemed to be archaic, following a pattern where government was like the rulers of old, acting as patrons to the citizens, and largely detached from them. This detachment sometimes provided a cover for criminal activity, but more often reflected the conviction that detachment favoured governability.

Today, perhaps owing to the twists of the 'tangentopolis' scandals ⁵, or to the introduction of electoral systems favouring candidates rather than parties ⁶, this 'political' detachment has begun to be reduced. Now it is necessary to move to a new stage in reducing the detachment of government. Now local authority leaders, in conjunction with local firms and citizens, need to develop ideas about the future of their communities, to produce a clear development strategy in

⁵ Judicial events connected with politicians' corruption.

⁶ See Law n° 142, 1990 on local autonomies and the 1992 *referendum* on electoral reorganization.

tune with the concerns of citizens. In this way it should become easier to make choices which will promote a balanced growth of the community. Such a strategy should lead to choices which lead to actions which are realised in good time and which have immediate results. This should allow rapid correctives, should strategies turn out not to be working well. Without these strategies, the community loses the sense of ownership of the policies and operations. Instead of feeling involved with the process of economic and social development, and gratified by the realization of the policies, the community could instead feel marginalised. As a result, citizens may not make any essential contribution to the initiatives. This is likely to result in failure, or produce other serious problems ⁷.

There is no denying that Italian political-administrative management in places like Taranto has a lot to learn from the experience of Northern England. First of all, it shows the value of an assiduous and a persevering commitment of scholars and - even if there are inevitable differences of opinion - administrators. Secondly, a constant search for the financial-managerial support for the policies stands out as an indispensable 'detail' which, when it has been omitted, is likely to lead to the failure of the objectives. Third, activities and events need to be well planned. This allows managerial efforts and the budget to be distributed according to a medium-term schedule closely connected with the goals to be achieved. (Actually, the question of short-time schedules is also well linked up with electoral propaganda needs, but this fact does not lessen much the importance and effectiveness of the good intention of British managers).

However, if all the above contributes to the cause of socio-economic development, it is essentially due to the support of people, of the community. In fact, both the search for consent and for the effective utilization of town, of potentialities, will be much more successfully achieved if linked to the building up a *town spirit*. This, it is argued in this paper, is a critical key to the success of policies for the revitalization of depressed areas, since it has the capacity to stimulate endogenous resources, the only ones always present in a community.

That is why today scholars are oriented towards a regionally inspired economy, which may cultivate the great endogenous potentialities, both with respect to the development of entrepreneurship, and - to cope with an interglobal market - to attracting diversified investments from the outside (Blakely 1989).

«The new element emerging from this theoretical basis is the strong, powerful emphasis laid upon the role of the wealth of human and territorial resources, in order to optimize the total potentialities of local environments. So, environment becomes the primary resource to be referred to for local development planning: physical environment, in which to improve the image and quality of life; administrative environment, in which to see to the availability and efficiency of incentive policies; aptitude environment, in which to sift, to improve, to propose local professionals» (Borri & Camarda 1990).

In a period of economic *empasse* such as the present difficult international situation, the importance of local resources, of the *human factor*, is far greater than intelligent methodologies and far-sighted plans. It is from the energies and initiatives of people that the innovatory strength which is absolutely necessary for development is derived.

And the reality in Newcastle in recent years shows this kind of human capacity at work, with people reacting constructively to local oriented policies, certainly much more than in past years.

⁷ See the case of London.

After the disintegration of the aspirations to an economy based on large scale manufacturing industry, today a base of service sector and medium/small entrepreneurship is developing ⁸, involving, though with much difficulty and many contradictions, the interests of the local community. It is no hazard to infer that the people of this town are slowly recovering confidence in themselves and, above all, in their own capabilities.

From the point of view of an Italian commentator, accustomed to the extremely slow bureaucratic/legislative apparatus of his country, the variety of policies applied in the North of England are at first the most striking aspect of local development activity. But the most remarkable aspect is certainly the interactivity of those measures with the community to which they are directed: a mutual giving and learning between administrators and citizens which is a great help to civil growth and to the progress of the economy. So civic spirit increases and becomes the real guarantor for a socioeconomic development which, though not untraumatically, progresses with no interruption.

Certainly this is the most important lesson that we can learn from the English experience in Newcastle upon Tyne, an experience perhaps unique of its kind but with radical implications, inasmuch as it stimulates an increase in the energy and vitality of the citizens as a force to counterbalance an economic crisis which might otherwise be incurable.

⁸ About 60% of the employed in the region. Source Northern Development Company (1992).

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