

URBAN SETTLEMENT PROCESS IN SICILY: FROM HISTORY TO THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

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Abstract: *Urban settlement process in Sicily: from history to the contemporary period.* This paper deals with historical settlement process in Sicily from modern age to present day through a spatial analysis of urbanization process in the island. The paper is divided in three parts. In the first part we speak about the main features of settlement urban process from the modern age to beginning of the controversial modernization period which coincides with the post war reconstruction. The second part is about the demographic analysis of the three principal metropolitan areas of Palermo, Catania and Messina from 1951 to 2010 in which we detect two different stages. The first one is characterized by high rate of population concentration in the main towns' center (capital of district) until the 70'. From this decade the principal Sicilian cities know phenomenon of counter-urbanization. This paper will give a concise representation through cartographic maps of this settlement process as well as the socio economic factors who determine the more recent settlement processes. In particular the analysis move from the application of the model of FUR (Functional urban Region) introduced in Europe by Cheshire and Hall (1989) that differs from administrative ones. Finally in the last part of this paper we borrow the model of urban life cycle by the geographer Van den Berg and then modified by Emanuel. It will be applied to the three metropolitan areas. In this model the authors detected 6 typologies of urban settlement structures. In the conclusion we try to define the main characteristics of this current settlement patterns, stressing that its weakness reflects a serious sluggish of social and economic development hard to take off.

Rezumat: *Procesul de urbanizare în Sicilia - de la moștenirea istorică la perioada contemporană.* Această lucrare se ocupă cu procesul de urbanizare sub raport istoric în Sicilia de la epoca modernă în prezent printr-o analiză spațială a procesului de dezvoltare urbană pe insulă. Lucrarea este împărțită în



trei părți. În prima parte vom vorbi despre principalele caracteristici ale procesului de urbanizare din epoca modernă la începutul perioadei de modernizare, care coincide cu reconstrucția de după război. A doua parte a lucrării este despre analiza demografică a celor trei zone metropolitane principale din Palermo, Catania și Messina din 1951 până în 2010, în care am putut detecta două etape diferite. Prima se caracterizează prin rata mare de concentrare a populației, în principal orașele din centru (capitala de district), până în anii 70. De acum principalele orașe siciliene cunosc fenomenul de contra-urbanizare. Acest studiu va ilustra concis prin hărți procesul complex de dezvoltare urbană, precum și factorii socio-economici care determină procesele mai recente în contextul evoluției sistemului urban sicilian. În particular, vom trece la analiza și aplicarea modelului regiunii funcționale urbane, introdus în Europa de Cheshire et Hall (1989), care diferă de modelul politic și administrativ. În final, în ultima parte a lucrării apelăm la aplicarea modelului ciclului de viață urban elaborat de geograful Van den Berg și apoi modificat de Emanuel. Acesta va fi aplicat asupra zonelor metropolitane. În această abordare se disting 6 tipologii ale structurilor urbane. În concluzie, vom încerca să definim principalele caracteristici ale acestor modele de dezvoltare urbană contemporană, subliniind faptul că slăbiciunea lor este o consecință a dezvoltării economice și sociale din această parte a Italiei.

Key words: *urban settlements, urban functions, urbanization, Sicily.*

Cuvinte cheie: *așezări urbane, funcții urbane, urbanizare, Sicilia.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to describe the geo-historic evolution of the settlement process in Sicily during the last two centuries, above all focusing our attention on the demographic transformation over the past sixty years, which affected the structure of the Sicilian urban networking, analyzing the three bigger metropolitan areas (Palermo, Catania e Messina) of the island. Sicily is an island located in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea and it is part of the Italian “Mezzogiorno¹” of Italy. Its geographical position enabled the presence of unnumbered civilizations in the whole island, influencing the territorial organization and shaping the formal space of the Sicilian cities through the great deal of cultural and historic evidence. Urban settlement plot means a set of physical infrastructure and environmental conditions that, generated by historical and socio-economic processes linked to urbanization, define both the structure and the material organization of cities and the settlements organization in the territories.

The present Sicilian urban plot is made up by 393 cities/towns with different functions, dimensions and urban gravitational fields. The Sicilian urban geography is characterized by three metropolitan areas whose main “core” population is more than two hundred thousand inhabitants, by ten middle sized towns (with more than fifty thousand inhabitants) and a thick networking of small sized towns. In the past, most of them took on considerable economic and administrative functions. In the first part of the paper we defined the main geo-historic features about the Sicilian urban settlement plot from the modern times until the present. In the second part, indeed, we analyze demographic trends

¹ Italian “Mezzogiorno” is a term used by geographers and economists referring to the macro region made up by eight administrative regions (Abruzzi, Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria, Sardinia and Sicily). Except Sardinia, it corresponded to the “Kingdom of the Two Sicilies” ruled by the Bourbons. Nowadays it is the less industrialized geographical region in the whole Italy.

of the three metropolitan areas over the past fifty years. In this analysis we use the “Function urban region” (FUR) model in order to define the boundary criteria of the single metropolitan area. Finally in the third part of this paper we borrow the model of “urban life cycle” by the geographer Van den Berg and then modified by Emanuel. It will be applied to the three metropolitan area. In this model the authors detected six typologies of urban settlement structures. In the conclusion we try to define the main characteristics of this current settlement patterns, stressing that its weakness reflects a serious sluggishness of social and economic development hard to take off.

2. THREE CENTURIES OF URBAN REVOLUTION IN SICILY

The presence of countless civilizations that colonized Sicily for a long period shaped urban centre plot, leaving tangible and intangible evidences of their presence in the urban plants and the relationship between town and country until today. During the late XVII century this urban plot was crystallized because of the repopulation policy of country towns adopted by the Spanish Kingdom. According to this policy, the kingdom gave the authorization to populated “virgin lands” (*licentia populandi*) to the barons who moved from inner mountainous areas to the hilly ones. In fact, there were significant differences between mountain and hill farming, with the latter being more productive than the former. Between the XVI and the XIX century one hundred and thirteen new towns were founded, above all in districts (*comarche*²) located in the west part of Sicily and in the volcano Etna, area between Catania, Acireale and Taormina, in order to exploit large landed estate bound to the cereal crops in most cases (fig. 1). The main factors that pushed entire populations to move from most populated territories or economically less endowed toward desert lands with cereal crops propensity, were due mainly to demographic pressure, to the increase in food demand, to the shortage of arable land and to tensions on the international market of wheat (Renda M., 1979). In the absence of financial resources by the Spanish crown, the Sicilian barons class, owners of the majority of lands to be urbanized and cultivated, was the main social force of this “urban revolution”. Founding a new town was in fact an entrepreneurial activity where the profitable revenue came from the agricultural work.³ Another historic fact that has transformed the Sicilian urban geography was the earthquake in 1693 that destroyed completely many towns in the south east part of Sicily (the ancient *Val di Noto*). Most of the cities were rebuilt on the original site with a modern plant (orthogonal and rationalist design) while few of them (Noto and Lentini) were built in another site, closer to the coast. The design of the new towns plants was more open than in the past to facilitate the commerce and the relationship with the docks.

² The “comarca” was an administrative division by districts decided by the Spanish Kingdom in 1583. It remained until 1812 when the feudal system in Sicily has been abolished.

³ The foundation of a new town by the barons class gave them automatically political, administrative and judicial power. Unlike the state-town ruled directly by the viceroy expression of the Kingdom where people could be considered as citizens of their community enjoying more rights, people living in feudal towns were considered as vassals of the lord (Renda F., 1995). The new feudal towns led to an imbalance in the urban social structure, because since 1789 more than 60 % of Sicilian population lived in them. The fact that the majority of people were considered as vassals and at the same time the lack of a strong industrialization process would be an obstacle to the formation of a modern dimension of citizenship in Sicily.

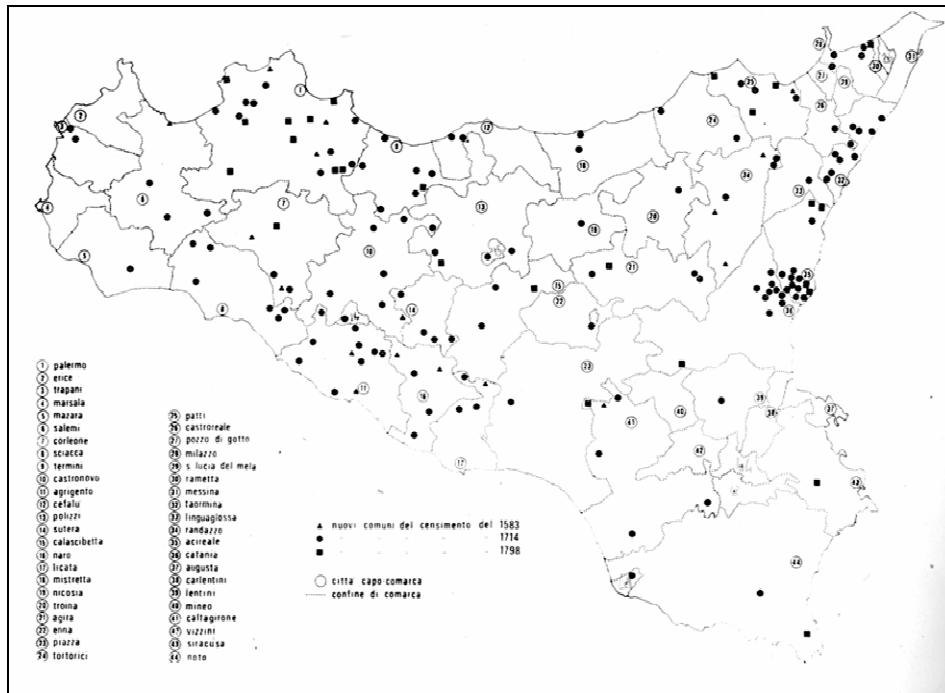


Figure 1: Sicilian towns founded between 1583 and 1790
(source: Giuffrè M., 1979)

In the past, the economic vitality was due to the presence of a dense network of small sized towns which had received the status of “town-state” from the kingdom of Spain. At that time, most of these towns such as Randazzo, Alcamo and Castelvetro, have performed more relevant economic, administrative and cultural functions than today. After the Italian unification (1861), the Sicilian landscape was characterized by the presence of many small and middle sized towns (20-50 thousand) populated by inhabitants employed in agriculture (agritowns). This typology of settlement was the typical feature of the countryside because they were real dormitory towns for the land owners and for the peasants, and their tertiary functions were limited to the people who lived in them (fig. 2).

The stimulus to the urban agglomeration (sinekism⁴) and the process of demographic osmosis generated by internal migration (intra regional) of people coming from the neighboring territories on one hand shaped an urban landscape without sprawling phenomenon, on the other generated the formation of new urban identities⁵. Besides this

⁴ “In the ancient Greek sinekism specifically referred to the agglomeration of several minor human settlements under the rule of a capital or so called city-state or urban system, a network of urban settlements of different sizes that interacted with each other inside the regional boundary” (Soja E. W., 2007 p.45)

⁵ In Sicily the temporal internal migrations (trashumance) were widespread and consisted of peasant migrations from mountainous zones towards the hilly ones for the cultivation of cereals and citrus

rural framework made up by small town not enough connected with each other, there had been economically and cultural most dynamic experiences represented by town in demographic increase, which wielded a more powerful gravitational field on the neighbored territories. At the beginning of the XXI century, some middle sized town such as Acireale and Modica, for instance, stand out for their strong role in the territorial organization and serve as places for the transformation of agricultural products and commercial exchange, thanks to the development of the axis port-rail (Dato,1987).

Up to the seventies in the XX century, the greatest geographers who addressed their studies on Sicily, recognize in unison the lack of cohesion and interdependence of urban settlement in Sicily: the lack of a urban hierarchy and urban network, which does not exhibit a clear urban center interdependence in terms of functions (Pecora, 1968).

In the second post-war period, we can see the acceleration of two trends that had already been present over the past years: the first one is the migration flow from Sicilian inner areas to the coastal ones. The inland areas were already economically marginalized and with the fall of Spanish rule they progressively lost their privileges linked to the Crown, while the coastal areas were the pivotal center of the economic boost. The second trend concerns migration flows from the countryside to the urban centers, which start to concentrate a notable quantity of population.

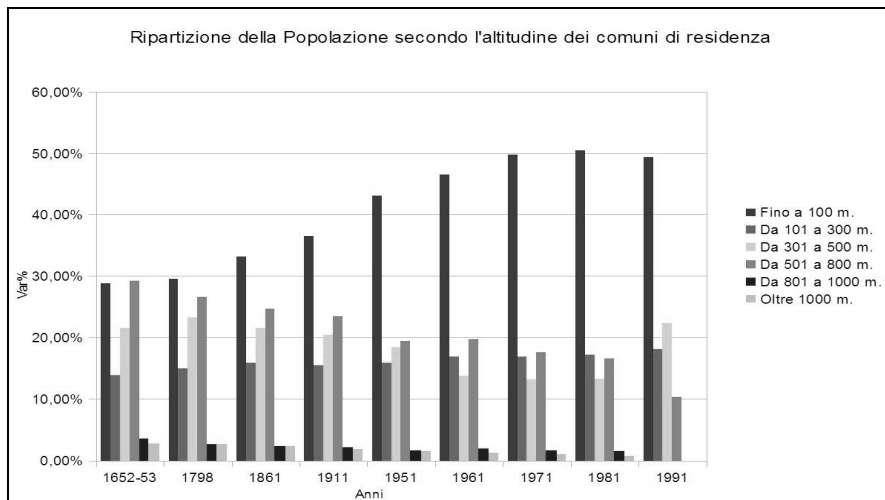


Figure 2: Population distribution according to town altitude
(source: Istat, elaboration by Grasso A.,1994)

fruits. At the beginning of the XX century several studies estimated that more than one hundred thousand people had emigrated temporarily inside Sicily. In some cases migrants settled in their places of destination, transferring to there their habits, uses and religious feasts (Barone G., 1987).

3. URBANIZATION PROCESS DURING THE SECOND POST-WAR PERIOD

From a demographic standpoint, from the fifties of the last century, the process of population concentration in main urban centers has increased in a remarkable way. Taking into account the demographics data of residents in the district capitals⁶, we can see that during the decade 51-61 there is a positive growth in all capitals and it is higher than the population of the entire corresponding district. In particular Catania and Siracusa are the main cities that increased their population of 21%, Palermo and Agrigento follow with a growth of 19% and 18%. Finally there was also an increase of Messina population of about 15%. The urbanization process has kept on in the following decades (61-71) with a notable increase of Catania and Palermo (9%), the main Sicilian cities. Moreover Siracusa population grew up, but less (7%), while Messina decreased (-1,5 %). The population concentration in the main cities after the second post-war is due to a set of economic and social pull factors:

- Land reforms in 1950 strengthens capitalist farms and forces small agriculture workers to move towards town
- Bureaucratization of economy: public administration absorbs a great deal of workers
- the state intervention in economy permits the building of infrastructures and new residential areas including council housing: take off of building firms
- Scarcity of local industrial structure
- Cities are the center of commercial activities and consumption

The pattern of urbanization in Sicily reproduces some features that can be found in the formation of the southern Mediterranean or South American mega-cities, although at a reduced scale and appropriately contextualized. In fact, the massive urbanization in the fifties and sixties had strong consequences in the urban tissue of the Sicilian cities. Cities expansion towards peripheral areas occurs in an uncontrolled, illegal and disorderly way, in the total absence of structured planning. The elements of attraction of the core cities of Palermo, Catania and Messina are marginally related to the proliferation of industrial activities, as it happens in northern Italy; on the contrary, the growth of these large cities is tied to country-town migration and demographic forces (fig. 3). The decisive factor, however, comes from the development of activities related to trade and the public sector, which absorbed the majority of employees rather than the industrial sector. The more the city grows up physically and demographically, the more the informal activities controlled by organized crime increase.

However, the exodus of farming employees expelled from the agricultural sector was not wholly absorbed by the city, which in those years was facing an economic and social restructuration. In fact, during the years of the greatest urban concentration, internal and external emigration rates were higher in large urban centers.

⁶ Sicily is divided into nine districts: Agrigento, Caltanissetta, Catania, Enna, Messina, Palermo, Ragusa, Siracusa and Trapani. Each district has a capital.

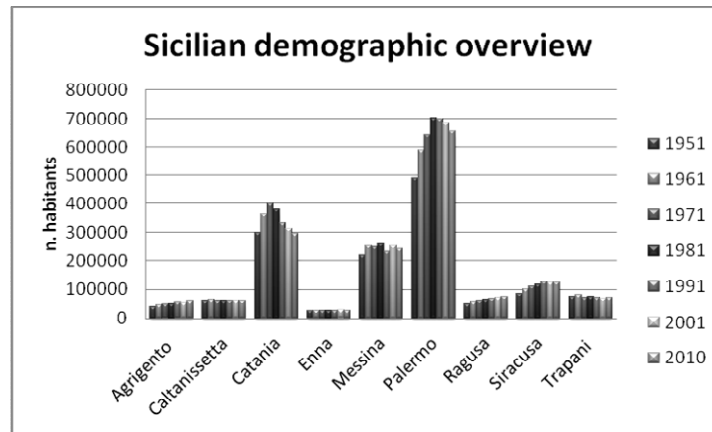


Figure 3: Demographic overview in Sicily
(source: Istat, authors' elaboration)

3. 1. Human Settlement evolution in the post-fordism city

Since 1970, almost all the Italian core cities began to empty because of the counter-urbanization process. The core of the largest Italian cities was facing a phenomenon of demographic loss of residents, as Berry describes in his studies. Fielding has taken up Berry's arguments and defines the concept of "counter-urbanization" in more operational terms, stating that demographic growth rates and size class of towns that were directly proportional in previous decades became inversely proportional since the 70's. In other words, small sized towns, above all the ones placed in the urban ring of large cities, increased their population in relative terms in detriment of the urban core of reference. As a visible effect of the counter-urbanization processes in Sicily, we can notice how the population of larger urban centers (core) starts to decline after 1971-81, while small and medium-sized cities increased their population. According to demographic data analysis of the main Sicilian cities during the years 1991-2010, over ten middle sized towns (population between 50.000 and 200.000), nine cities grew demographically, while Caltanissetta, which is the core of its urban area, lost population because of counter-urbanization phenomena. In what concerns the small-middle sized towns (between 20.000 and 50.000) over 41 towns, 34 increased their population while the remaining 7 decreased. Among these the two main urban nucleus of central Sicily: Enna, capital of district, and Piazza Armerina marked a negative value, respectively -1% and -6% , following the process of depopulation in the marginal inner zone of Sicily. In general, small and medium cities, located in the ring of the nine capital districts, grew during the last twenty years (1991-2010). More specifically, however, among the small-middle sized towns that increased most, we can find the ones belonging to the Palermo's ring, such as Misilmeri, Villabate, Carini e Monreale which have registered an increment of 38%, 37%, 66% and 43%. In what concerns Catania metropolitan areas, we should underline the population growth of Acicatena (38%) and Mascalucia (48%) (fig. 4). The change of territorial assets and settlement structures in the 70's in Italy are mainly ruled by spatial proximity, economic attractiveness and urban gravitational field; these multiple factors were fostered

by enhancing road networks (highways), public means of transportation (intra and inter-regional railways) and the widespread use of private cars. All these facets have facilitated the movement of population in areas adjacent to the major urban centers.

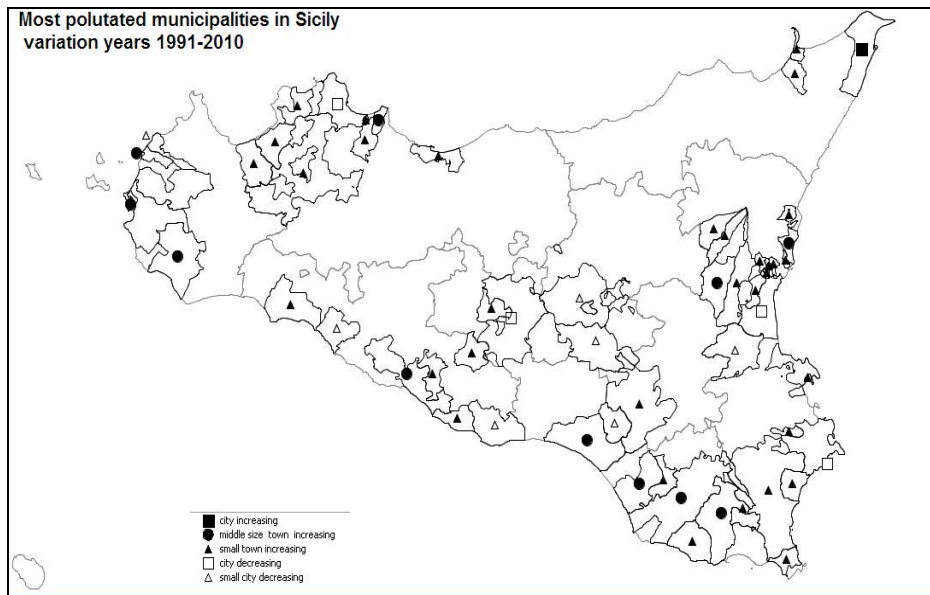


Figure 4: Population variation 1991-2010
(source: Istat, authors' elaboration)

In Sicily, the phenomenon of urban sprawl has features similar to the other regions of southern Italy. Since the seventies, two centrifugal forces determine the "escape" from city centers in the most populated cities (Palermo, Catania, Messina) to suburban areas, often with disastrous results in social and environmental terms. The first one was an attempt to decongest the historic centers through the enlargement of the residential zoning within the administrative boundaries, with the consequent increment in the consumption of soil bound to agricultural activities.

The suburban landscape of Sicilian cities started to be characterized by the construction of neighborhood made up by public housing. According to the planners, this residential pattern would have carried out autonomous functions (edge city) instead of the urban center. Nowadays most of these suburban areas are affected by social segregation, anomies phenomenon, high crime rates and high inhabitants' density. We are facing a population spill over that provokes a suburbanization process instead of function's decentralization in the extra-metropolitan areas (Ruggero V., 2008). In Palermo new suburban neighborhoods were built in the seventies, such as Borgo Novo (22,000 hab.), CEP⁷, and ZEN⁸ (16,000 inh.); in Catania we can find the quarter of "Librino" (40,000

⁷ The CEP acronym stands for "center of public housing"

hab.), while in Messina “Torrente Ginostra” quarter was built up in the north and Camaro quarter in the south of the city. A second centrifugal force, however, concerned a shift of population from historic centers and urban centers to the extra-urban areas, generating processes of peri-urbanisation. Most of the Sicilian historic centers have been losing residents, although they remain heavily congested by city users and commuting people every day. This phenomenon is due to the fact that there has not been a decentralization of economic (services) and cultural functions in the urban rings.

3. 2. Urban Region Function (FUR) and urban cycle life of Sicilian metropolitan areas

In order to analyze the demographic processes of metropolitan areas it is necessary to make a brief introduction about the methodology applied in this research. First of all it concerns the definition of boundary criteria selected among different classifications used in Europe and Italy. Boundary criteria definition is important to analyze better the flows (people, goods, communication) between the most attractive and dynamic urban nucleus (core) and its urban belt (ring). In the description of settlements urban plot regarding the Sicilian metropolitan area of Palermo, Catania and Messina, we have considered the functions and economic attractiveness of their cores. Our analysis begins with a definition of boundary criteria that does not coincide with administrative ones, but it is based on spatial analysis (flow network) that is generated between the core and the ring. In this regard we have chosen to apply the concept of Functional Urban Region introduced in Europe by Cheshire and Hall (1989). In Italy such an operational definition of boundary criteria coincide with “local system of work⁹” (Istat-Irpet, 1986). The criteria that are generally used for the identification and definition of a metropolitan area are gathered into three categories (Martinotti G. et al, 1993):

- a. Homogeneity: municipalities are grouped on the base of similar population, density rates, economic and social features
- b. Interdependency: according to this criterion, may be considered those areas or municipalities that exchange goods, people and communication with the main city.
- c. Morphologic: it is referred to the spatial contiguity.

According to the FUR’s parameters, the core is considered as one or more contiguous municipalities, with a population density of at least seven workers per hectare and a population exceeding twenty thousand inhabitants. The ring, however, is made up by the municipalities contiguous to the core, where 10% of their population moves every day to the core, for work or study purposes. In our research, we apply this geographical (contiguity and proximity) and economic-functionalist parameter to detect each Sicilian metropolitan area. Moreover we divide each area in urban sub-system in order to study the transformation of urban settlement structures and the direction taken by suburbanization process. Finally the last part of this paper will focus on the “urban cycle life” model by the geographer Van den Berg and modified by Emanuel, in which they identify six typologies of urban settlement (figures 5, 6 and 7).

⁸ The ZEN acronym stands for “north zoning expansion”

⁹ As defined by Istat-Irpet, “local system of work” are “aggregations of contiguous municipalities (not necessarily in the same region or province), built on the basis of an analysis of the population traveling for work purposes, which are detected during the Population Census” (Istat, 2006, p.415)

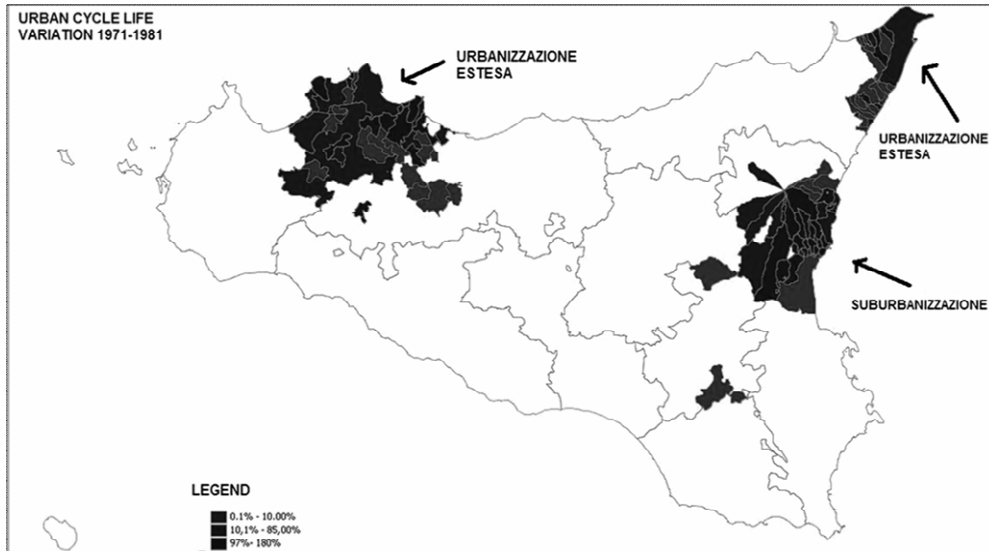


Figure 5: Urban Life Cycle (1971-1981).

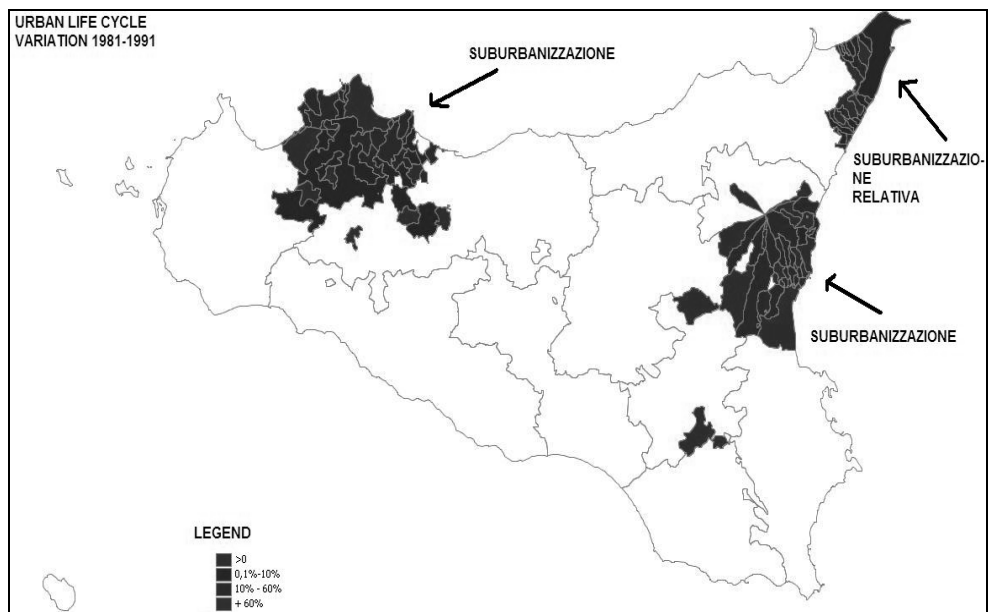


Figure 6: Urban Life Cycle (1981-1991)

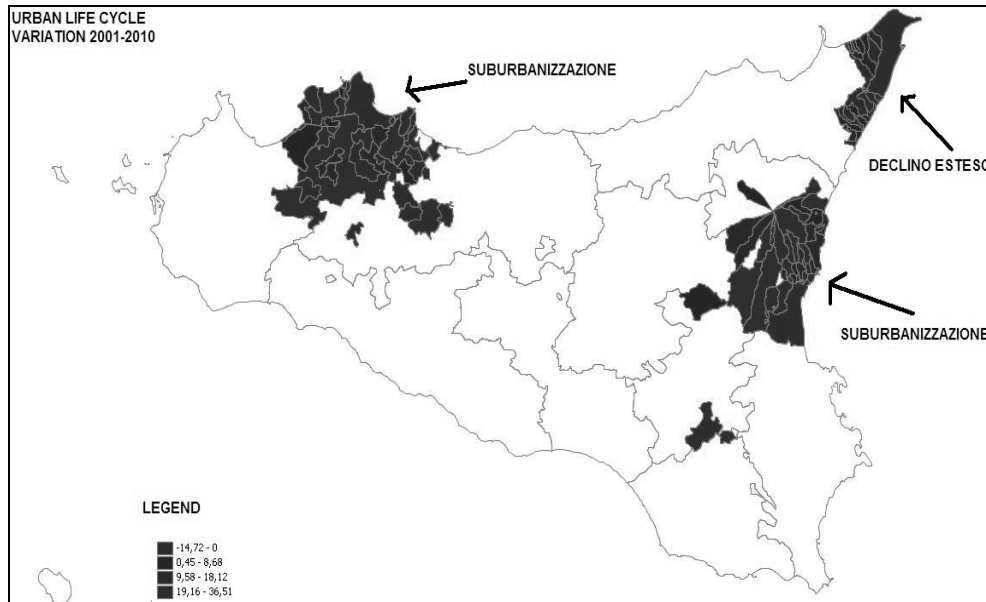


Figure 7: Urban Life Cycle (2001-2010)

Each one is the result of the comparison between the demographic variation (in percentage value) of the core and the variation of the ring and the entire FUR.

The six typologies are:

- **Urbanization:** when the core's percentage variation is positive, while the ring's one is negative and FUR one is positive.
- **Extensive urbanization:** when both the core and the ring and the whole FUR grow in terms of percentage.
- **Suburbanization:** when the population variation of the core is negative while it is positive both in the ring and in the FUR.
- **Partial urbanization:** when population variation of the core is positive, the ring's one is positive but the FUR's one is negative
- **Partial suburbanization:** when the population variation of the ring is positive while both the core and the FUR are negative.
- **Extensive decline:** we have a general loss of population both in the core and in the ring and in the FUR.

- | |
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| <p>1) Urbanization: $Va(c)>0$; $Va(r)<0$; $Va(F)>0$
 2) Extensive Urbanization: $Va(c)>0$; $Va(r)>0$; $Va(F)>0$
 3) Suburbanization: $Va(c)<0$; $Va(r)>0$; $Va(F)>0$
 4) Partial urbanization: $Va(c)>0$; $Va(r)<0$; $Va(F)<0$
 5) Partial suburbanization: $Va(c)<0$; $Va(r)>0$; $Va(F)<0$
 6) Extensive Decline : $Va(c)<0$; $Va(r)<0$; $Va(F)<0$</p> |
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We calculate the percentage variation of the population since 1971 until 2010 about the three metropolitan areas of Palermo, Catania and Messina. According to our calculations, we draw the following conclusion:

Palermo 71-81 EU; 81-91 S; 91-2001 S ; 2001-2010 S
Catania 71-81 S; 81-91 S; 91-2001 S ; 2001-2010 S
Messina 71-81 EU ; 81-91 PS; 91-2001 EU; 2001-2010 ED
EU= extensive urbanization
S= suburbanization
ED= extensive decline
PS= partial suburbanization

The **Palermo's** metropolitan area is a monocentric urban settlement where the core, Palermo, has historically had a clear supremacy over its ring because of its administrative functions (in 2004, 25% of provincial GDP was produced by the Public Administration). A lack of a strong industrial sector produced a hypertrophy of the services sector which occupies 85% of the working population. Unlike other Italian metropolitan areas that began to lose population in the early seventies, in Palermo it decreased after the eighties. In its metropolitan area the coastal urbanization process is stronger than in Catania and Messina's urban areas. Over the past 40 years, the municipalities of the first belt have grown substantially for reasons of proximity, with acceleration in the last ten years (+37%). The proximity factors have played an important role in the suburbanization process in the last ten years; in fact, the coastal municipalities are the ones that have grown more than the inland ones, such as: Ficcarazzi (46%), Isola delle Femmine (55%) Monreale (43%), Villabate (37%), Carini 66%) e Casteldaccia (36%). The constant increase of first belt municipalities in the last 40 years is due to the displacement of people from other Sicilian districts, while the incidence of population movement from the city of Palermo has been weak. Besides, suburbanization process have not affected the inner area because of the territory morphology and the lack of transport infrastructures. Therefore, the process of urbanization is very dense and concentrated in a very narrow area that has the highest density per km² rates among the whole Island.

Catania: among the Sicilian metropolitan areas Catania is the first city that pioneered forms of suburbanization process in line with the main largest Italian cities. Since 1970 Catania's population has begun to decrease through the displacement of its residents towards the first belt, located at Etna's slopes. During the two decades 1971-1981 and 1981-1991, the population of the first belt municipalities grew up about respectively 87% and 30%. From the nineties on, the process of suburbanization shifted to the second belt municipalities that had population growth rates higher than the first one, with an increment of 19% (1991-2001) and of 22% (2001-2010). It means that the urbanized area is going to spill over toward the Etna foothills. Another area strongly urbanized is represented by the urban subsystem of Paternò which includes the towns of Ragalna and Motta Santa Anastasia placed in the "plain of Catania" in the west side.

This area knew an important increment in the last years (12%) and the core of Paternò, specialized in transformation of agricultural products and service sectors, exerts a strong influence in this area. Finally, the second belt municipalities and the subsystem of Paternò and Misterbianco are gaining more population (in relative terms) than the first one.

This is due to the fact that the first belt municipalities is a heavily urbanized area where the empty space, bounding to residential housing, is scarce and under more strictly planning constrictions (mature suburbanization).

Messina: the core of Messina grew up during the decade 1971-1981 (3,8%), while the Tyrrhenian urban subsystem and the entire FUR increased 8% and 3,7% (extensive urbanization). In the following decade 1991-2001, population growth affects only the Tyrrhenian coastal areas (9.6) and the Ionic one (1.5) while core decreased (- 10%) *as well as* the entire urban region -7.5% (partial suburbanization). In the decade 1991-2001 there was a population recovery due to the increment in the core, in the ring and in the FUR determining extensive urbanization.

On the contrary, in the last ten years we face a demographic extensive decline with a loss of population in the core (-3,8%) and a low augmentation in the FUR (2%). As shown by the statistics data, the Tyrrhenian sub-system has been more attractive than the Ionic urban subsystem. In fact, the Tyrrhenian urban area is made up by middle sized towns such as Barcellona, Pozzo di Gotto, Milazzo and Capo d'Orlando that, because of their industrial and dock activities, exert a certain attraction to the small towns located in the inlands zones. On the contrary, the Ionic urban settlement has had different residential and socio economic patterns. It's an area affected by the phenomenon of second house (vacation home) and by touristic facilities.

4. CONCLUSIONS

According to the European Union, cities should be the engine of growth and territorial cohesion as preview by the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP). However, the economic and financial crisis boosted in 2008 show us that cities are the epicenters of this economic turmoil, and the centre of propagation. This disastrous spiral brings cities and their inhabitants to pay high costs in terms of social cohesion. In fact, municipality budgets start to suffer a remarkable reduction of funding from the central government. Sicily is not immune to this spiral, despite being located on the outskirts of the great European metropolis bounded by the cities of London, Paris, Milan, Monaco and Hamburg. Because of its marginal position, Sicily feels less the effects of the financial and economic crisis, that still endangers the existence of the European Union. So far, it is very difficult to measure the effects of this crisis on the urban settlement plot and the socio-economic structural changes that it is going to provoke. However, territorial imbalance which Sicily is still facing should be compared and analyzed in the light of its geo-historical evolution. In fact, human settlement in Sicily is facing the lack of a balanced and polycentric urban system and a distorted connection between countryside and city, or inner areas and coastal areas. In this section we summarize the qualitative and quantities facets that produce these territorial imbalances.

In the description of the evolution of settlement patterns, a displacement of people from inland to the larger coastal urban area persists since long; it is a historical phenomenon that slows but does not stop. This kind of dualism is the emblem of an asymmetric settlement plot and it is reflected in other economic and social fields. In fact, we can find a dualism between empty areas and densely populated ones, between economically marginalized areas and areas seen as nodes for potential economic take off, but still dependent to the traditional service sector.

A special mention for the metropolitan areas of Palermo and Catania: both aspire to play the role of metropolitan cities trying to define strategies in order to make their urban spaces more "comfortable", generating economies of agglomeration to attract capital and resources (tourists, branch of big companies, etc. etc.) in the framework of inter-urban global competition. The attempts of regenerating their historic centers through the "Urban" program by EU, should be considered as a strategy to improve the attractiveness of the cities (Urban supply). However, Palermo's and Catania's metropolitan areas must cope with some structural deficiencies relating to the settlement organization of the entire area: first of all the absence of a redistribution of functions, even the most banal, in the peripheral areas which are merely containers of residents with inadequate infrastructure facilities. Such a spatial organization produces a double effect: the social and economic depression of the peripheral areas and the abandonment of the city centers by its residents. The historic centers of Palermo and Catania gather the most important function of the entire urban areas; for this reason they are highly congested due to the dense flow of people moving from the suburbia to the center for different purpose (working places, commerce, entertainment etc). The congestion of the central areas depended on the massive use of private cars and the lack of autonomy of the ring towards its core. It is the result of an urbanism based on an unbalanced economic system, with an insufficient industrial basis, and also based on an excessive weight of the public outsourcing that produces a passive dependency on the welfare (Grasso A., 1994)

This "polycentrism imperfect" generates diseconomies of scale. For this reason we consider positive the recommendations expressed in the document ESDP, that is, the need to implement effective policies to contain urban sprawl. This kind of policies, carried out in the past, appear to be a failed choice and unmotivated, since Sicilian spatial organization is not shaped by the presence of a network of small and middle enterprises, as it happens in the "Third Italy" or in the productive area of the North-East. "Metropolitan sprawl" has significant environmental costs in terms of loss of land in natural areas of a certain value as the Etna and of unequal and inadequate infrastructure and environmental quality of the territory in the peri-urban areas. The return to the compact city could better meet the three strategic options for the principle of sustainability: residential efficiency, distribution efficiency, environmental equity. However, the return to the city could have a negative effect by generating gentrification effects that endanger the existence of strong urban identities sedimented in the Sicilian historic center.

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