

**URBAN SHRINKAGE.  
THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM A  
SOUTHERN EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE**

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Keywords: shrinking cities, urban regions, Italy

**SOMMARIO**

Over the last decade, many studies have focused on the demographic and functional decline occurring in several cities throughout the old industrialised countries, both in Europe and in the United States. This process, rapidly dubbed by the international scholarship ‘urban shrinkage’ (Pallagst et al., 2009), does not seem to present the same features in each country. This aspect is not clearly underlined in literature, even though some authors recognised the nuanced nature of the phenomenon (Hollander et al., 2009) . Particularly, literature does not stress sufficiently the need to collect data at an appropriate geographical scale, identifying the territorial units where the indicators must be assessed: 1) the municipal boundaries do not suit in order to evaluate the shrinking processes, because these ones have often a trans-border nature; 2) the different urban systems can respond differently to the ‘global’ solicitations, according to their economic basis, social fabric and planning capability (Wiechmann and Pallagst, 2012), showing variable gradients of resilience.

Starting from a critical review of the international literature, which requires to be sharpened in its assumptions and theoretical frameworks, we propose an empirical exercise of interpretation of the Italian urban systems, trying to assess the validity of the concept of ‘shrinking city’ in a Southern European context.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

These notes intend to discuss the conceptual category of urban shrinkage from an analytical perspective, a concept widely discussed in international debates but much less so in Italy, bearing in mind the spatial trends taking place in Italy over the past decade and recorded in the last census (2011).

What are the distinctive features of urban shrinkage? The term was invented to indicate the processes of physical abandon and economic decline involving many urban areas of old industrialisation affected by the production crisis during the transition to post-Fordism. We are therefore faced with a multidimensional phenomenon, which needs to be observed paying particular attention to the demographic and employment dynamics and their implications in terms of urban intervention policies.

In literature, there are many significant examples of studies focusing on the abandonment of the industrial cities of the so-called North American Rust Belt (Buffalo, Cleveland,

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Youngstown, Pittsburgh etc.), dominated by the production cycle of steel and metal industry; the urban centres of the former German Democratic Republic, “victims” of the 1990 reunification and the post-socialist transition (Wiechmann and Pallagst, 2011); the Polish urban systems (Nowak and Nowosielski, 2008); and metropolitan Japan (Flüchter, 2008). Many attempts have also been made to include French and British industrial cities in these reflections (Cunningham-Sabot and Fol, 2009), whose decline is related to the emergence of new regional specialisations as a response to globalisation, resulting in the relocation of private investments from heavy industry to high-tech sectors.

From Nord-Pas-de-Calais to the Ardennes; from Lorraine to the belt of industrial centres of the Massif Central; from the Scottish conurbations (Greater Glasgow, Western Isles) to the Black Country; the abandonment process appears to be generalised, increasing migratory flows directed towards capital cities and urban centres more active in technologically advanced industries.

Although there are different forms of “urban contraction” – a classification, for example, has been outlined by Cunningham-Sabot and Fol in the work mentioned above (2009) – and promising to enter into the merits of a more advanced stage of research, we accept the definition of urban shrinkage that can be drawn from international literature (Pallagst, 2008; Plöger, 2011; Wiechmann and Pallagst, 2012; Wolff, 2011; Martinez-Fernandez C. *et al.*, 2011): a phenomenon characterising densely populated areas that record a population loss in large sections of its extension and, at the same time, undergo a transformation of the economic base, presenting some symptoms of structural crisis. The “crisis-contraction” combination dominates the reflections of international research and deserves to be expanded upon accordingly.

### *1.1 Crisis and urban shrinkage: an economic link?*

The structural crisis highlighted by international research is generally measured by indicators such as the employment rate and per capita income of residents: when these show negative variations and, at the same time, a negative demographic trend, the urban area is considered a shrinking city. The phenomenon of demographic contraction is therefore related to industrial restructuring processes aimed at a drastic downsizing of the local production base, and is associated with high unemployment rates, growing dependence on public welfare, and the decay of the urban environment caused by the mass departure of the population and the abandonment of residential assets (Plöger, 2012).

The link between “crisis” and “shrinkage” is always present in the introductory remarks of essays on the topic, but is rarely actually developed from a conceptual and interpretive point of view. Leaving aside for a moment the methodological implications of research on urban shrinkage, which we will resume later – and which concerns the definition of city, or urban system, and which we intend to take into account as an object of analysis – it is impossible not to notice that the relationship between urban shrinkage and the recurring crises of the capitalist regime of accumulation is a topic that is curiously absent from Italian debates on the subject (with the exception of the successful work by Alessandro Coppola, 2011, that focuses, however, on the United States).

Despite the attention that has rightly been given by macroeconomic and regional economic literature in Italy to the derivatives “crisis” associated with the *sub-prime* mortgages granted in support of the housing market between 2007 and 2008 (Bruni 200?; Percoco, 2009; Presbitero, 2009) and to the late yet violent impact this has had on the societies and economies of Southern Europe, up until now, Italian territorial research has not been able to address this issue using its own analytical categories, an issue more relevant than ever if we

consider the persistence of recessionary phenomena and the stark material evidence of its effects on settlement patterns.

This crisis is, however, the subject of many theoretical insights and empirical studies in international literature, encompassing urban geography and planning, according to theoretical approaches, investigative methodologies and cross-disciplinary studies that are not always suitable given the nature of the processes underway, and is not at all uniform, varying considerably from country to country and accompanying phenomena of different signs, sometimes even opposite.

Moreover, not only the application, but the very nature of the “crisis” concept appears controversial. Going beyond the nevertheless useful original meaning of the ancient Greek term *krisis* – “the action of deciding, dividing, breaking, transitioning” – we can recognise a sharpening perception – and the subsequent definition of empirical evidence – of a crisis phenomenology during the most intense phase of the unfolding of globalisation, namely in the years spanning the eighties and nineties. With the disruption of the bipolar world order, Western capitalist systems as well as the socialist regimes of old Europe experience an intense restructuring of social structures, economic systems and mechanisms for political regulation. These processes are frequently associated with the terms “decline”, “decadence” and, of course, “shrinkage”, and are projected against the backdrop of the advent of neoliberalism.

For several years, Western sociology has been undertaking the analysis of social disintegration generated by the spread of neoliberalism, that, like any form of modernisation, produces “human waste” (term used by Zygmunt Bauman: 2004) put into circulation by the emergence of new production paradigms and new social and economic structures that exclude those who do not have adequate skills to enter the labour market and who represent a “cost” for public welfare systems. To some extent, “using a provocative way”, these works make their own the interpretive categories of the experience of decline drawn from anthropology of the post-socialist transition (Dietzsch, 2009: 2).

Within certain limits, then, we can look at the phenomenon of urban shrinkage as an epiphenomenon of a structural shift, a “crisis”, in fact, that more generally produces *urban waste*, a conceptual category that not only includes material rubble of (parts of) cities that have become *dispensable*, no longer necessary, and therefore abandoned to physical degradation, but also includes the roles they had and the people who played them.

As mentioned on several occasions, these narratives have primarily focused on post-socialist societies (Dietzsch, 2009; Großman *et al.* 2008) and areas of old industrialisation unable to respond positively to the post-Fordist transition, with particular reference to the North American Rust Belt, East Germany, Poland, the “peripheral” French regions (Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Lorraine, industrial belt south of the Massif Central) with only a few impressionistic notes dedicated to Southern Europe (Turin, Taranto).

In general, Italian cities are not “protagonists” of these works, yet in international studies there are many explicit references to demographic decline recorded in urban centres of the peninsula, for example in Plöger (2011) and Wiechmann and Pallagst (2012), classified within a general tendency towards shrinkage.

Nevertheless, to us it appears useful to focus on Italian urban systems, especially in light of recent census data that, as we shall see, provide a picture of an Italy split in two by a North-South divide, but with characteristics that differ greatly compared to the post-war division. In particular, while in the period immediately following the Second World War the South experienced an exodus towards the most industrialised areas of Northern Italy and Western Europe, but the large southern urban areas still showed significant demographic growth, today demographic decline appears generalised throughout the entire South, urban and non-urban, albeit with some important exceptions (Bari, Salerno, Catania), whilst the urban North is massively growing, as we will show later.

It is possible that the organisational differences of the Italian urban structure, which have established themselves over a long historical period – mainly polycentric in the Centre-North and hierarchical-christallerian in the South – are the cause of the different “response” to changes taking place in the economic and productive structure of late capitalism. Indeed, the affirmation of the dominant role of cities in Italian history dates back much further than industrial development, while in other European and non-European contexts, the process of urbanisation has been closely connected to industrialisation.

### *1.2 Objectives and structure of the paper*

If it is not possible to verify the hypothesis of the influence of long-term spatial dynamics on urban response to global change within this paper, topic which deserves to be assessed in a next phase of the research, however we envisage here to demonstrate that urban shrinkage model does not fit to any process of demographic decrease and functional decay occurring in urban systems, and that these processes need to be analysed contextualising cities in the specific macro-regional system they are situated.

The publication of the 2011 Census results (ISTAT, 2012) provides us with the opportunity to take a look at the overall applicability of the categories associated with urban shrinkage to the Italian context, focusing on the transformation processes of urban systems, based on general data collected from across the entire country which, under certain conditions, can be compared with analyses carried out in the European context.

In fact, in recent years copious international literature has dealt with the phenomenon of shrinking cities, attempting to create cross-country comparisons which invariably result in a summary of general statistical observations and a focus on specific situations – examples of individual urban realities – whose choice appears to be based on nothing more than impressionistic observations (note, among others, Wiechmann and Pallagst, 2012; Hollander *et al.*, 2009; Audirac *et al.*, 2012; Cunningham-Sabot and Fol, 2011) .

In this article, we will therefore attempt to bring some order to the argument, according to the following structure:

- 1) Section 2 hosts a reconstruction of the theoretical framework on the processes of urbanisation, also reviving an aspect that today is neglected by literature on the urban life cycle, in the hope of creating a distance from the interpretive logic which emphasises the role of economic causes (the end of Fordism, the real estate/financial crisis of 2007-2008) whilst showing no sign of wanting to measure itself against broader interpretations, tending to treat structurally different urban areas in an equivalent manner; in addition, the Section presents a definition of the territorial units for statistics, to adopt a definition of city that corresponds to the phenomena in observation;
- 2) Sections 3 and 4 offer a preliminary survey of demographic and economic processes taking place in Italian urban systems, through a long retrospective look that goes up until the data collected in the last Population Census (ISTAT, 2011), which would seem to highlight the revival of a marked North-South dualism: especially concerning the behaviour of territorial structures, whose qualitative aspects are, however, likely to be very different than in past;
- 3) In Section 5 there are some concluding remarks on the limits of the application of concepts drawn from specific spatial processes, such as urban shrinkage, to situations that are structurally different, like in the case of Italy, and on the need for further theoretical and interpretive elaboration in this area.

## 2. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES AND LIMITS OF GENERALISATION

“Urban shrinkage is not a new phenomenon” (Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, Fol Cunningham-Sabot, 2012, p. 213) but it represents a specific subject of an ample scientific literature that, since the late 60s, has attempted to describe and model the general process of transformation and sprawl in urban systems of Western countries (Gottman, 1964; Berry, 1976; Hall and Hay, 1980; Van den Berg *et al.*, 1982; Hall, 1984; Cheshire and Hay, 1989; Fielding, 1989; Gottman and Muscarà, 1991; Friedrichs, 1993; Cheshire, 1995; Soja, 2000; Champion, 2001; Sassen, 2001; Scott and Storper, 2003; Oswalt, 2006; Baron *et al.*, 2010).

The different development paths of cities are thereby placed in a broader, complex and diversified process of spatial transformation, characterized by events of concentration and functional upgrading at a global and continental scale and, simultaneously, by a continuous search for new areas to be exploited at a regional and local level. Growth and decline of the metropolitan and urban systems or areas are therefore the manifestation of the temporal and spatial cycle of the global economy and markets driven by actors constantly looking for specific income position (Harvey, 2000 e 2005).

In order to give a first representation of the evolution of the Italian urban systems in light of urban shrinkage, we have referred to the demographic component at both temporal and spatial scale. In this sort of recognition, we have interpreted the urban decline through the concentration of population, given that data on economic activities for the last census (2001-2011) are still not available. For this we have calculated the percentage change in the resident population at the different dates of General Census of Population, 1951 to 2011. This period of time is long enough to highlight structural spatial dynamics and show the supposed "cyclic" performance, being the observation divided into consecutive intervals, even if they are affected by arbitrariness of the date of the census. For the last decade, we have also gone in-depth in our observation considering the natural and migratory patterns. Also with regard to the geographical scale, we have made reference to a double dimension: national and local. The national level is an unavoidable political-institutional and economic framework of spatial differentiation of the analysed phenomena. The local scale is relevant as well, because at this scale specific factors of differentiation of the territorial systems operate in combination with the dynamics of the global economy, which can contribute more than others to trigger their growth or decline. More precisely, the territorial units of reference are the "local labour systems" used by Istat, the Italian National Institute of Statistics. These are areas of daily commuting drawn up on the basis of census data, statistical territorial units that group several municipalities to one central municipality that attracts a working day-time population. We used the boundaries of 2001 because the subdivision of the last census survey is still not available. To ensure uniformity in the use of definitions, we welcome the indications provided by ISTAT in its *Rapporto 2007 (2007 Report)* (2008).

This definition of territorial system is “functional”, as it interprets the relationship between work and home as a form of interdependence that allows the identification of relatively homogenous urban areas of gravitation. However, in addition to this approach, there are at least two others: one that interprets the urban phenomenon in morphological terms, i.e. taking into account the built areas *continuum*, in this case the area in which buildings follow one another with intervals not exceeding 200 metres; and another that looks at the city as a social organism with administrative, productive and commercial functions. Similar reflections are developed, moreover, in a ponderous study on “Villes et régions en contraction”, carried out by an international research team in 2010 (Baron *et al.* 2010)

If applied separately, these three criteria give partial results that greatly vary from one another, and are therefore generally inadequate for explaining the evolution of the urban phenomenon.

Consequently, it would seem more useful to use them jointly as “filters” that allow a selection, out of the 686 LLSs covering Italian territory, of those that can be truly considered urban systems. There are obvious advantages: this method results in broader and more complex territorial divisions compared to the simple municipal jurisdictions, respect for the typically urban vocation of tertiary and administrative activities, and also takes into account the “perception” of physical density as a criteria for defining the urban phenomenon (the density/variety combination mentioned by Lévy, 1997) (Fig. 1).

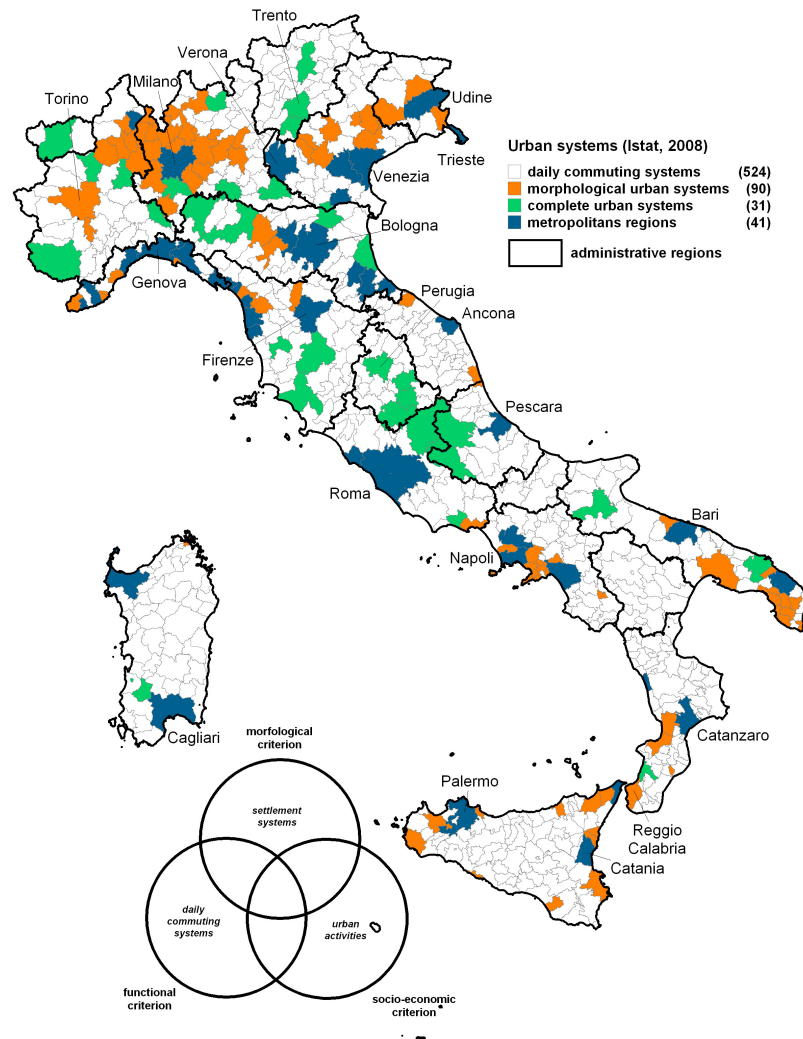
### *2.1 Three categories of “urban systems”*

In this preliminary operation, ISTAT identified 162 local systems throughout the country that for various reasons are considered to be “urban”, of which 41 satisfy both the morphological and vocation criteria, 90 only the morphological criteria and 31 only the vocation criteria (Fig. 2).

These 162 urban systems account for 25% of the total number of LLSs, including 40% of all Italian municipalities (that approximately total 8100), cover 30% of the national territory and are home to 66.5% of the 2011 population (more than 38.9 million inhabitants). Within these urban systems, based on the prevalence of one of the three criteria, we make a distinction between:

- 1) **90 morphologically urban LLSs:** characterised by high population density (454 inhabitants per square km, more than twice the national average), with main employment in the manufacturing sector (e.g. Turin, Bergamo, Busto Arsizio), located predominantly in the North-West (31) and South (41); in 2011 approximately 14.5 million residents lived in these areas (24.5% of the entire population); these are cities that had or still have a prominent role in the national industrial system, but with a generally lower supply of “rare” services than other cities of comparable size;
- 2) **31 vocationally urban LLSs:** the population density (136 inhabitants per square km) and the density of urbanisation are below the national average, the main centres are Parma and Piacenza in the North, and Perugia in Central Italy; overall these areas are home to 6.6% of the Italian population, equal to 3.9 million inhabitants; in this case the cities offer “urban” services that are relatively superior compared to their dimensional size.
- 3) **41 “metropolitan regions”:** these systems combine the relevant dimensional and service characteristics; they have a large average size (500,000 inhabitants), with high population density (657 inhabitants per square km). More than 20.4 million Italians live in these areas, 34.4% of the total population; these cities are more common in the South, whilst in the North have a greater population (approximately 8.4 million compared to 6.8 million in the South). Primary systems: Rome (3.6 M), Milan (3.1 M) Naples (2.2 M).

Figure 1: local labour systems by type of urbanisation (2011 data)



Between 2001 and 2011 the different types of Italian local labour systems grew in varying degrees: the category with the most evident growth was that of the morphologically urban systems (+6.4%), closely followed by the vocationally urban systems (+6.2%); the metropolitan regions grew by 3.5% whilst the non-urbanised systems grew the least (+3.3%). The metropolitan regions, despite not being the most dynamic systems overall, experienced greater growth in Southern and Central Italy.

However, as illustrated in Figure 2, the Northern metropolitan regions, and in particular Milan, are practically surrounded by morphologically urban systems: this means that they have maintained and probably reinforced their centrality as highly ranking regional/national centres with “superior” functions, but demographic growth in the area has especially affected the suburbs, according to the well-known mechanisms of suburbanisation and sprawl, which in Italy is referred to as *città diffusa*.

Another interesting aspect regards the varying attractiveness of the systems in terms of migratory flows: the vocationally urban systems are the most attractive (10.5 new arrivals for every 1000 inhabitants), followed by the morphologically urban systems (6.5 per 1000 inhabitants) and the metropolitan regions (7.6). If in North-East and Central Italy the metropolitan regions have a very high value (respectively 14 and 13.4), net migration to the urban systems in the South is weaker and even slightly negative in the most urbanised areas.

### 3. A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE DEMOGRAPHIC EVOLUTION OF LOCAL SYSTEMS IN ITALY

Before focusing on the last decade, a retrospective glance at the temporal trajectory of the Second World War is useful not only for summarising, but also for explaining some interpretive issues that have represented themselves in more recent times.

As pointed out in recent works on the same topic, any consideration that focuses solely on contemporary times is likely to provide an incomplete and misleading picture of current trends (Grasland and Sessarego Marques da Costa, 2010).

The percentage variations in the population of urban systems in the decade 1951-61 confirm recognised trends: during this period all peripheral and rural local systems lose a large part of their population to urban systems and, in particular, metropolitan regions. The drainage was especially acute in the systems located along the Apennine ridge and marginal areas of the North: Polesine, Mantua, alpine systems etc (Fig. 2).

This situation is accentuated in the following decade – 1961-71 – with massive depopulation (from -30% to -20%) at the expense of systems located in internal mountainous areas, especially in the Apennines. Conversely, notable demographic growth in metropolitan regions (from +20% to +30%), was accompanied by a significant increase of non-metropolitan urban systems.

During the decade 1971-81, the slowdown of industrial development that began in the second half of the sixties was reflected by population trends: the growth rate in Northern Italy, characterised by large industrial concentrations, clearly decreased, whilst positive trends persisted in certain peripheral systems where district economies were consolidated or strengthened. The hypothesis that this is due to the industrial districts development seems to be corroborated by the positive dynamics characterising both the Central Italy and Adriatic Corridor.

On the contrary, in Southern Italy tumultuous metropolitan growth was accompanied by the strengthening of urban systems affected by the so called Extraordinary Intervention and the establishment of public and subsidised industry, causing the first clean break between the



Northern metropolitan systems undergoing a phase of economic slowdown, and the Southern metropolitan system that were draining the population from inland areas.

From 1981-91 these dramatically opposed dynamics underwent a major change, with a significant and generalised contraction in many Northern and Central urban systems and the continuation of the demographic crisis in the Southern peripheral systems, with particular emphasis on the local systems located along regional boundaries or the outskirts of macro-regions (Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Eastern Veneto, the Ligurian coast, non-metropolitan Piedmont). The local systems of Made in Italy production (textile, furniture, shoes) still keep their positive sign.

Between 1991 and 2001 another element arose in its novelty: all of the country's metropolitan systems appear to be in demographic crisis, whilst the local urban and non-urban systems of the peripheral areas of Northern and Central Italy – although not dramatically - start growing again. The crisis of the Southern metropolitan areas – an entirely new Italian demographic trend – was matched by an even more accentuated crisis of the local systems located in inland areas of Southern Italy.

In this case the question is: not just being a matter of a reduced birth rate, where is the migratory component directed? Most likely towards the more dynamic systems in the North, where there are also some particularly lively components in terms of growth (notably the areas in Eastern Lombardy and Central Emilia where districts survive)?

Finally, the past decade (2001-2011) (Fig. 2). After a generalised analysis of the entire national territory, we can certainly affirm that the macro-regional North-South divide has returned to be the protagonist, which in past years had been challenged by the emergence of growing areas in various parts of the country, on the basis of equally different driving factors (industrial districts, especially in the so-called 'Third Italy'; in the South, urban systems favoured by public industrial investments or government incentives for the localisation of private facilities). The inland areas of Southern Italy are those most affected by demographic haemorrhage: if Calabria and Basilicata are almost entirely in demographic deficit (the situation in Basilicata particularly confirms the observations made by Salaris, 2010), inland Sicily, northern Apulia, inland Molise and Abruzzo are not in better condition.

Most of these processes overlap regional boundaries, in peripheral systems rather than central areas of economic and administrative life, especially in the South, but also along the regional boundaries between Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany, Liguria and Piedmont, and northern Veneto and Friuli.

The demographic growth of the systems that make up the Po Valley is particularly striking, almost all of which have a positive balance and, in some cases, extremely positive. This contrasts the obvious urban crisis of the southern regions, where metropolitan regions and many urban systems, almost everywhere, are losing population.

It is therefore worthwhile to focus on the trends verified in urban systems over the last decade, in order to formulate interpretative hypotheses and compare them with the reflections provided by international literature on the theme of urban shrinkage.

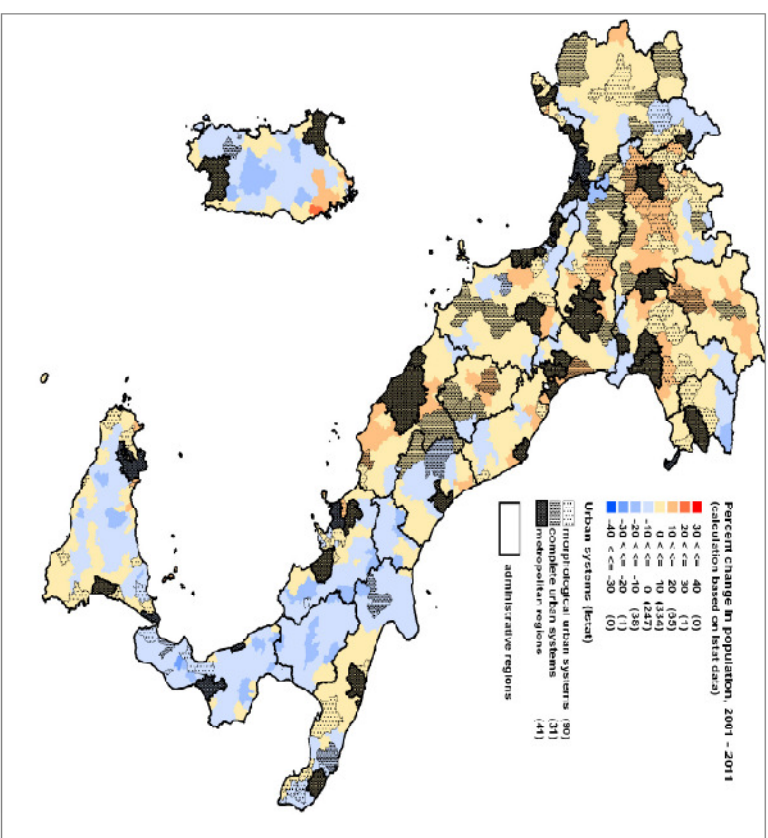
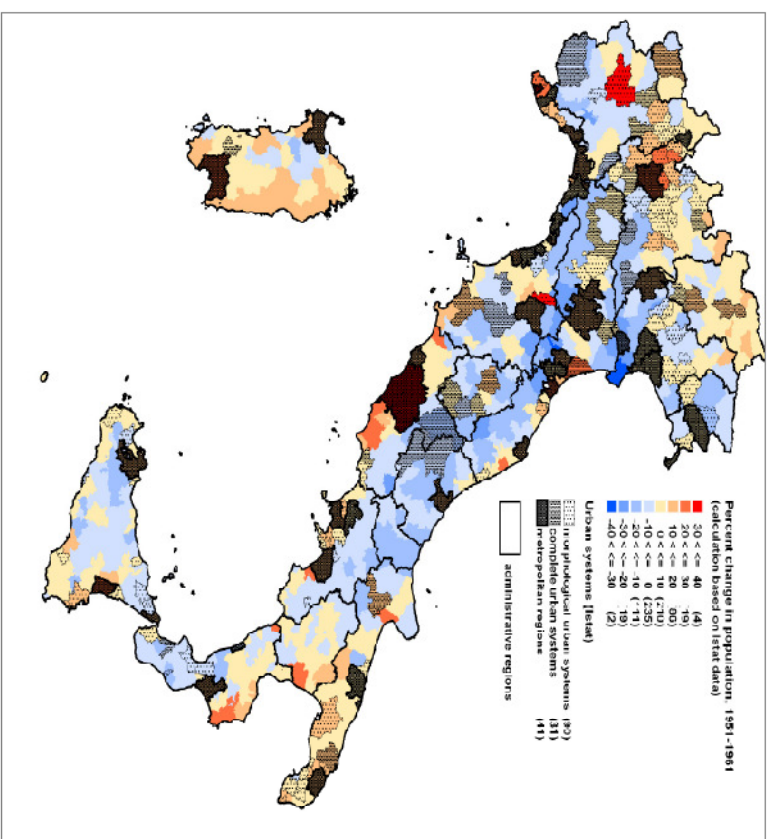


Figure 2: percent change in population, 1951-1961 and 2001-2011

#### 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE DIVERSIFIED PATH OF ITALIAN URBAN SYSTEMS

After this synthetic review on demographic dynamics occurred in the Italian urban systems during the last sixty years, and a focus on increase/decrease processes of the last decade, we are proposing some interpreting hypothesis and comparing them to the main findings of international research about the urban shrinkage.

This does not mean, of course, reassuming the dichotomous model as a dominant perspective in the interpretation of Italian spatial evolution, but rather recognising that the ancient divisions, as such, persist as structural elements in spite of the significant changes that have occurred on the Italian peninsula since the second half of the twentieth century. Our goal, therefore, is to offer a plausible explanation for this process of diversification in terms of spatial dynamics, attempting to make a distinction between contingent factors and effects and long lasting ones.

Then, let us summarise the main items of our analysis and offer some interpreting remarks, which shall be validate in the following phases of the research.

First, we have highlighted the “re-appearance” of the North-South cleavage, which seems considerably drawn by the distinctive behaviours of urban and metropolitan areas. With no exception, all northern metropolitan systems have a ‘plus’ sign, but the rhythms of this demographic growth, however, differ according to the nature of the systems: the cores grow slowly, while the rings have far higher scores. If you observe the phenomenon at a national scale, the picture describes the strong suburbanisation which features the spatial dynamics in many industrialized areas - and not only in our country - between 1990 and 2010, and which is likely one of the various faces of metropolisation.

On the other hand, the loss of population in the South is general and concerns also many urban systems which were attractive before, with some exception: Bari and some Apulia’s systems, Lecce, Catania.

Second, we must look for the linkages between the demographic dynamics and the economic structure. Unfortunately, the absence of official data concerning the economic activities of the Italian systems in 2011 does not allow to cross-evaluate the demographic dynamics and the economic performances. Nevertheless, assuming as relatively stable the economic specialisations depicted by ISTAT in its 2005’s Report (Fig. 3), and comparing them to the population change 2002 to 2011 (Fig. 4), we can make some general considerations:

- 1) Urban systems that grow both for natural and migration increase are concentrated in Northern regions, notably along the Milan-Venice axis, where many studies enlighten the dynamic role played by innovative medium-sized firms (Coltorti, 2007); the same positive trend can be observed in Central Emilia, Adriatic coast and the Rome system; in the South growth is far less scattered, and the positive trend looks strongly affected by the attraction of historical metropolitan poles;
- 2) while in the southern regions all internal areas have declined, in most systems of North and Centre, furthermore, both internal and coastal areas have grown, thanks to a positive migration rate: these systems are those where the Italian districts are the dominant way of industrial organisation, and it helps to contend that these systems remain attractive for migratory flows despite the industrial crisis.

Notwithstanding the preliminary nature of these notes, which deserve to be further developed with new statistical sources notably on the industrial dynamics, we believe that the recent dynamics of the Italian systems contrast the idea underpinning the ‘urban shrinkage model’: the idea of a generalised phenomenon of contraction in cities affected by industrial decline throughout Europe. At least in the Italian peninsula, the shrinkage hits the less industrialised cities of the South, but it is not perceivable in the large and middle-sized cities of North and

Centre. It could mean that in a country where the basic structure of the urban systems was already established before the industrialisation, differently from many other European countries, the shrinking tendencies are less common and require specific tools of analysis. Just to give a suggestion, the overall framework of population dynamics reveals that in the twenty years 1981-2001 the main urban systems, particularly in Northern and Centre Italy, experienced a period of crisis. This is a relevant aspect which should be further investigated, taking into account the differences between the core demographic dynamics and the ring's ones. Over these two decades, Italian economy has experienced a major transformation period with the end of the system of large state-holding enterprises and special financial aid to the South, the emergence of new models of flexible production and the beginning of important processes of industrial decentralisation and delocalisation. It could be in these processes, perhaps, that we could ascertain some traces of urban shrinkage according to the features indicated by the international literature.

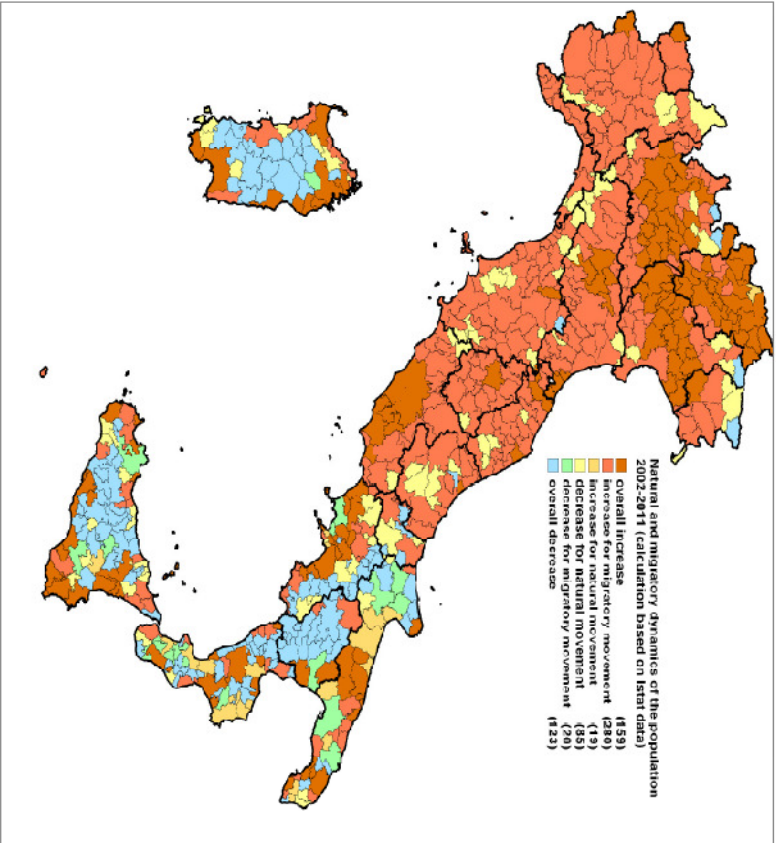
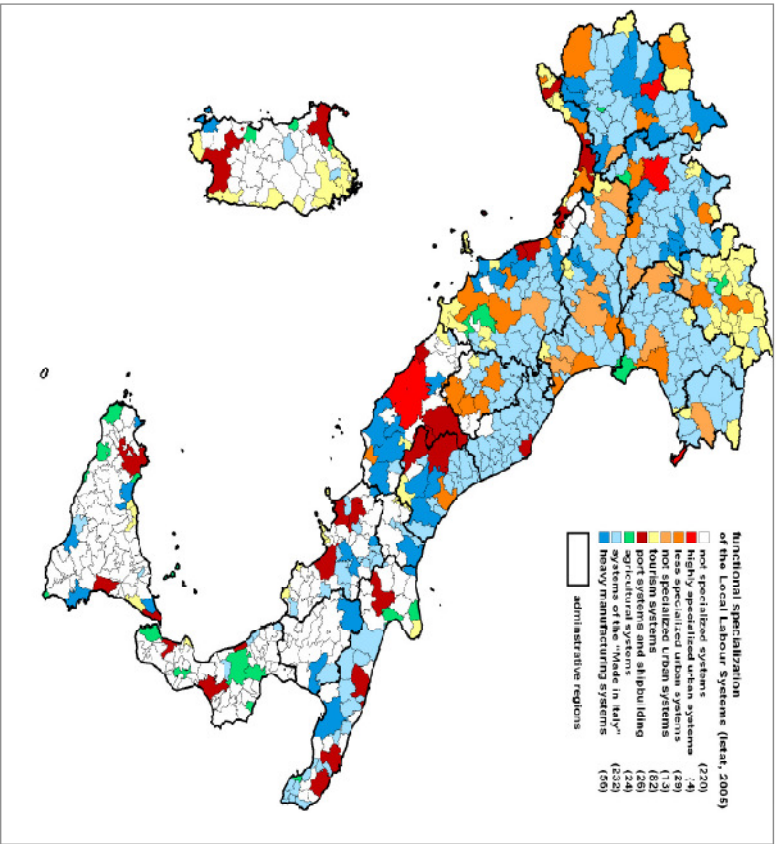


Figure 3: economic and territorial typologies of the Istat LLS

Figure 4: demographic dynamics, 2002-2011

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